

Black Sound, White Noise: An Autoethnographical Examination of the  
African American Musician

By  
Allison Lewis  
Lawrence, Kansas  
B.M., Bachelor of Music, University of Kansas, 2013

Submitted to the graduate degree program in African and African American Studies and the  
Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of Master of Arts.

---

Chair: Dr. Shawn Leigh Alexander

---

Dr. Nicole Hodges-Persley

---

Dr. Sherrie Tucker

---

Dr. Peter Ojiambo

Date Defended: 10 September 2019

The thesis committee for Allison Lewis  
certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

**Black Sound, White Noise: An Autoethnographical Examination of the  
African American Musician**

---

Chair: Dr. Shawn Leigh Alexander

Date Approved: December 2019

## Abstract

*Black Sound, White Noise* is an autoethnographical examination of the American Music Educational system and the damaging effects its ideologies, practices, and abuses have on the African American student musician. The first chapter uses traditional African educational practices to understand how African American music is constructed. By understanding that African American music making is generationally maintained and purposefully created, I aim to de-essentialize African American musicality while supporting the idea that genre itself is an oppressive social construct. By understanding the hierarchy of not only race but genre, I show in chapter two how these constructs of genre and the oppressive practices of educating classical music work to create a system that not only abuses the African American student musician but others who are more vulnerable to those with power within the institution. In chapter three I attempt to apply the lens of traditional African educational practices while teaching singing to four middle school African American girls. Continuing with autoethnography, I examine my experience with teaching in this way and advocate for more creative and inclusive teaching techniques that value decolonizing the current American Educational system.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Shawn Alexander who originally encouraged me to apply for this degree and was the first ones to teach me that the way that I felt had a history to it. Other thanks to Dr. Ojiambo, Dr. Nicole Hodges-Persley, and Dr. Sherrie Tucker. All of these professors pushed, encouraged, supported, watched me cry, and heard me. This process, after what music school had been, taught me that there is a place for me; that I can always create space for myself and others. And be assured that for every person out there that does not want to hear you, there is always someone that will listen-they just may be harder to find. I would also like to acknowledge my sisters-Aubrey, Anastasia, and Angelica who are a never-ending source of love, support, and inspiration. And lastly, but most importantly, I would like to thank my mother Colleen who, without her unconditional love and tireless editing, this piece would genuinely not exist.

# Table of Contents

Introduction: “Who Am I?” ..... pg. 1

Chapter One - The American Sound: The Educational Tradition of African American Music Making and the Burden of Genre..... pg.11

Chapter Two - Hear My Silence: The Burden of Genre, Autoethnography, and an African American Experience through the American Music Education System..... pg. 31

Chapter Three - Young, Gifted, and Black: Deconstructing Methods of Teaching in the American Music Education System and Reconstructing New Ones..... pg.53

Conclusion: Singing My Way Back..... pg.65

Bibliography.....pg. 72

## Introduction: “Who Am I?”

When I was growing up as a black-mixed raced woman in a majority white community, I always had the now cliché black dad warning hanging over my head: “You have to be ten times better and work ten times harder in this world because you are black and a woman.” (Really some of the two worst things to be born according to Western standards). So, throughout my life I have tried to plan and prepare. It was my job to have a game plan and to have four more back-up plans. So, I have always found it funny that the things that have brought me more joy or at least higher levels of self-discovery have always started by accident. The very fact that I found Black Studies was a complete surprise and although my planning mind hates the phrase “Good things will happen when you least expect it,” here I am.

In my first semester of grad school one of the classes I signed up for was canceled so I ended up taking a Race and Education class. I also took the required 801 class and this combination of courses made me realize that my master’s was going to be harder than just the reading and homework. As my master’s became more focused it really felt that as I learned and gained a deeper understanding of not only African and African American history that I was also learning more about myself. As almost relieving as it was to know that the ways that I had felt were not without context, it was also exhaustingly painful. So many books, articles, songs, and movies that I consumed made me re-examine my own pain and trauma. It made me realize that I actually HAD trauma. I realized that it was weird that a woman who still loved singing and did so every day had learned to hate every space where she had previously done so. I did not set out to write my thesis as an autoethnography. I first thought I would focus on spirituals and then maybe all the external reasons why opera was racist. But I started to feel as though my education on black oppression was intrinsically connected to my own trauma.

When I learned what autoethnography was I immediately decided that this was the path I was going to take. I just said yes. It was a decision I would continuously question throughout the entire process, but I continued on. There was a logistical reason to use this method. Everyone I knew in opera was still in opera and was not willing to come forward. And now that I have gone through it, it would have been simply unfair for me to expect anyone to go through this if I was not willing to do so myself. Having to write and examine all these different events in my life: having to be fully honest about how painful and sometimes emotionally crippling doing all this reading, listening, and learning was; having to go through the cathartic experience of writing your stories and suddenly realizing how these moments had affected me in the long term- It was far from fun. However, I could not have written about black oppression in music education any other way. This work is not just as simple as reading a book, writing your summary, and getting on with it. This is my life. When I read *Stamped from the Beginning* or *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide: When the Rainbow is Enuf* or listened to Nina Simone for the first time, it's not just getting the good grade. This is MY life. And these pieces told me that the way I have felt is the way thousands of black girls have felt which is both a relief and distressing. Autoethnography is a methodology that is newly defined, but using this method was the only way to get my point across and has a historical precedence within African American studies. Black intellectuals from the past such as W.E.B. Du Bois and his discussion of his own educational experience at Harvard<sup>1</sup>, or Amiri Baraka repeating what his mentor, Sterling Brown, expressed to him one day in reference to black music; "This is the history. This is your history,

---

<sup>1</sup> William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of Race Concept*, (Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), 550-571.

my history, the history of the Negro people”.<sup>2</sup>Historians, theorists, and black intellectuals have often used their experiences to better explain and theorize the African American condition. More modern examples include Kyra Gaunt in her “Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double Dutch to Hip-Hop”<sup>3</sup> as she writes about her experience jumping rope with the Double Dutch Divas and how the experience supported her thesis that, “black female(ness) is socially learned and constructed”. Or there is Naomi Andre, who opens her book, *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement* by writing how uncomfortable she was showing a black non-opera enthusiast Mozart’s *Magic Flute*, as they watched black face traipse boldly across the New York Metropolitan Opera stage<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, it is important to take Sterling Brown’s words seriously. Our history is embedded in our music. Black intellectualism and theory do not lie solely within books and articles but has been expressed in our music since the moment we got off the slave ships. Although autoethnography is a new term, its existence is not.

In this thesis, I aimed to tell the narrative of what role genre plays in the way people are perceived and oppressed. I wanted to explain how opera and music education maintain this hierarchy. I wanted to explain that despite being “lucky” enough to enter this elite world, I really was simply lucky to survive it. And lastly, I wanted to explain that although institutionally I feel my story will do very little to change anything, that that does not mean the individual does not matter. As an individual you can decide to change. You can change your ideas. You can do

---

<sup>2</sup> Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, (Perennial, 2002), viii-ix.

<sup>3</sup> Kyra Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play: Music, Body and "Soul"* (New York University Press, 1997) 180.

<sup>4</sup> Naomi André, *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement*, (University of Illinois Press, 2018), 2-4.



better. You can decide to be a better and hopefully be a more impactful person. Maybe these stories do not matter on a structural level, but it is my stories coupled with the education I have gained that determines how I am going to be in this world. It determines the kind of artist, singer, teacher, sister, and friend I will be. I tried to write not only why this kind of oppression happens and what happens to the individual when they have to contend with it, but I tried to write about the process of coming to terms and fully understanding all of it through all this new education. I think that has a lot of value and the only way I could have fully discussed these topics was to include my stories. This is not to say that those who write about history through traditional means and write about histories that have no apparent connection to themselves are not important work, but it also does not make them more “unbiased”. These different methods simply make different work that have different values.

I tried to write a piece that told a whole and complete narrative. In Chapter One I use the lens of traditional African educational practices in order to examine the processes of African American music making. I assert that African American education has followed this pattern of emulating and adopting African educational practices as seen during the Civil Rights Movement. I continue the use of this African educational lens through the entirety of the paper, refocusing in chapter three.

I quickly do want to discuss the use of the word “traditional” when referencing African educational practices. It is my belief that the use of this word can bring connotations of an anthropological exploitative history. My aim is not to essentialize the African continent in service of de-essentializing African American music but to construct a lens through which I can examine how this music is constructed. The African continent is a vast space with a long and complex history of educational practices. I have chosen three key elements that may be found

within some, if not many, African communities in order to find unique ways in understanding ourselves. I also do not wish to place the continent on a pedestal and assert the belief that the Motherland is free of any critique. However, I do believe that African ideologies have a history of being used within the African American freedom struggle and I simply hope to continue that legacy.

Within this chapter I also use theories from sound studies and popular music studies such as Jennifer Lynn Stoeber's "listening ear"<sup>5</sup>. I also critique David Brackett's concepts of genre<sup>6</sup> and examine the oppressive categorizations of music, the politics of how those categorizations move certain populations throughout the hierarchy of race and begin to examine how this all impacts the individual within the context of opera performance and education. I argue that genre, like race, is a social construction and can easily be utilized to harm, hurt, violate, and kill. At the end of Chapter One, I discuss the murder of Jordan Davis. I want to quickly explain why I felt it was necessary to include this. I wanted to make clear why the stakes are so high. I think there is a real under valuing of music, even amongst musicians because students of art and music are not taught how important this production is. It's just music. It's just a song. It's just rap. It's just a dead black kid. Art matters. "It's just music" could easily translate to "just another dead black kid". My inclusion of this violent story is important to drive home why this all matters in the first place. Art matters because its role in building the perception of certain populations within our culture can be a potentially life or death situation, and music school, the great gatekeeper, instead teaches proficiency and mastery, which merely continues the cycle of who

---

<sup>5</sup> Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York University Press, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music*, (University of California Press, 2016).

can and cannot participate. They attempt to define who is and is not an artist, all the while never challenging its students to consider what responsibility the artist may or may not have or what the purpose of the artist even is.

While Chapter One focuses primarily on theory and sets up the “problem”, Chapter Two dives into the autoethnography and creates a narrative on how this “problem” affects the individual. By examining the individual, I hope to suggest that these traumas are systemic, wrought from an institution as old as opera itself. I aim to show how this trauma is not based simply on unlucky chance meetings with particularly ignorant teachers but is in line with other allegations of abuse that have begun to resonate throughout the country, opera houses, colleges, and so on. I aim to show that the culture of oppression and abuse is imbedded within the ideologies of how opera should be taught, and these theories trickle down so as to hurt students who are most vulnerable and protect powerful predators. With “weeding out” education music educators and abusers are able to create the standards that determine who is a “musician”, who is “talented”, and what is “mastery”. Those who do not live up to this socially constructed yardstick will fall by the wayside. This can create a desperate position for students who do not wish to be left behind, forgotten about, or blacklisted and thusly gives power to not only abusers but allows abusers to be protected within the institution. It is key to remember that opera is a highly established institution that used to castrate young boys to maintain their higher vocal registers. The ideology that music education is supposed to be traumatic and one is supposed to suffer for the service of art has a long history. Opera is and always has been an oppressive mechanism despite its beauty. Although this example is extreme, it is impossible to separate this history from the reality that is, what I would call, the epidemic of abuse within opera and the American music education system.

Additionally, I question what the effects are on the individual when one tries to craft themselves into a “master” for people and standards that don’t care about their life and will never be capable of living up to standards that are intrinsically connected to whiteness. How is it possible for a black musician to learn from an institution that knows nothing of their background, their culture, or the sacrifices that were made historically for them to even be admitted? How can artistic growth occur in an education system that refuses to recognize its responsibility in regard to why there are so few black students walking its hallways when half its performers are “jazz performance majors”? How can a black musician become an artist in a school that will inconsequentially use them as proof of diversity whilst refusing to acknowledge its own racist and unspoken policies and then expect to be thanked for graciously allowing them in the club? It’s an education that only cares about a student’s proficiency but very little about what a student may want to say when they finally achieve being “proficient”. And it’s dangerous. If we do not teach musicians how to think then those musicians go on to teach their younger students in the exact same way, never questioning why it is we teach music in this way. The cycle just continues on and on because the way we educate makes sure that it does.

In Chapter Three I continue to examine the oppressive nature of the current American music education system by comparatively placing it side by side with a small music program that I conducted at the Melting Pot Theater for two weeks in Spring 2019. Continuing on with an autoethnographical approach, but this time through the eyes of the teacher, I examine how music education can absolutely be an empowering process for young black girls instead of a long-running traumatic experience.

I wanted to end this work on a note of positivity and hope. The first two chapters are filled with violence and abuse and personal pain and I wanted the third chapter to express how

gaining all this new education has truly freed me and that despite my incessantly harsh critique, I do have an inexpressible amount of joy and love for music making. However, I recognize the switch from trauma and violence to hope and joy may be a little jarring. But working with the girls at the Melting Pot really was jarring. It was jarring to realize how difficult it was to not project these insane standards that I had grown up with onto myself as a teacher. It was jarring to see young girls who were just excited to create, felt free to do so, and didn't need this to be so "life and death". Although I wanted to relate the seriousness of this oppression, did I want our lives to just be about surviving? Should black art only be seen as a tool of survival? Because although I had all these different theories, traditional African educational techniques, and I was trying to decolonize my concepts of singing "well" while I am teaching, the girls had no need to know all of this information was bouncing around in my head. Although I tried to implement my last two years of education, in the end, these girls wanted to sing and dance and I was just lucky to be a part of it.

When the performance was over and I met all their parents, I just wanted to protect my students from any spaces, musical or not, that would make them feel anything but as good as I felt teaching them. It felt as though we had been doing something that mattered and was good for us. I never wanted them to go into a space that made them feel that they have to be anything other than what they were in order to create. And I intend to take what I've learned here and continue this work. Because now I know I can do it. I can create spaces for people where they and their work will be valued, and I think this thesis and this degree was just the first step.

*Black Sound, White Noise* is the culmination of a two-year journey, (which is actually a 29-year journey), of finding my place in the world and coming to understand why it was so hard to find. My story aims to convey that by rejecting previously set standards of mastery and genre

maintained by the American music education system, that then, and only then, have I been able to become a more capable artist. For this project, I offer up myself as the work. Within this piece I AM the evidence. I AM the history. I AM the research. In Rachel Alicia Griffin's *I AM an Angry Black Woman: Black Feminist Autoethnography, Voice, and Resistance*,<sup>7</sup> she explained to me how I could write, theorize, and historicize my own experiences to better explain the issues that stopped me from answering Nina Simone's question, *Who am I?* In Simone's words:

*"Have you ever heard of reincarnation?*

*Then you must question all the things that you've known all your life*

*All the love that you've known all your life*

*All the things that you accept to be true*

*Ask yourself*

*Who am I?"*<sup>8</sup>

Simone asked these questions during a live performance at a venue in Paris in 1968. She perfectly blends her classical piano skills with the music of her people and answers the questions as she asks them. To find out who I am, it is necessary to question all the things I have been taught to know in my life. I must tear down concepts of what "good" music is and redefine it for myself. Simone, an artist, rejected from her previous training and classical roots, redefined herself through her music. Griffin redefines what research and history is, as she herself felt rejected from the academic ivory tower that she inhabited, and defines herself as the angry black woman, reclaiming her agency within the stereotype. "I AM an angry black woman.

---

<sup>7</sup> Rachel Alicia Griffin, *I AM an Angry Black Woman: Black Feminist Autoethnography, Voice, and Resistance*, (Routledge, 2012),

<sup>8</sup> "Nina Simone: Who Am I?", YouTube video, 4:06, posted by "Nina Simone", February 2, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RSoxiYPex4E>

Unapologetically, rationally, and rightfully so. I am blistering mad! I am frustrated and enraged! I am devastated, and my blood is boiling at a temperature so hot that I think my heart might stop beating at any given moment!”<sup>9</sup> Like her, I turn to other black women and often black women singers/artists to guide me and know that my story is far from unique. As I read *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide*,<sup>10</sup> I knew that my story is as old as the first black woman in America. I am just another black woman realizing that in order to survive, live, and love then I will have to redefine what those things are for myself. I place myself and this thesis, a blending of stories, history, art, pain and joy, within the narrative and history of African American women who have felt this rejection and learned to reconceive for themselves *Who I Am*.

---

<sup>9</sup> Griffin, *I AM an Angry Black Woman*, 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ntozake Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, (Scribner, 2010).

## Chapter One

### The American Sound: The Educational Tradition of African American Music Making and the Burden of Genre

I was raised in a town called Flower Mound, Texas, which was about as white as it sounds. The only black people I knew and loved growing up, were related to me. Therefore, it did not occur to me as strange when I appeared for my first Texas All State Choir High School level audition, and I was the only black girl in the room. This was every situation in my life. The moderator broke us into groups, and I found myself third in a line of other thirteen-year-old singers. It was while I was waiting my turn to sing that one of the girls ahead of me began to start a conversation with the rest of us regarding race and singing. So instead of trying to focus on my audition I felt singled out by this girl stating that although the auditions were blind one could always tell when a black person was singing. She argued that black people sounded different, that their voices were bigger and more “soulful”, and I found myself distracted, confused, and frustrated, unable at that point, to express why she was wrong.

It was a strange moment for me as a young musician. I not only felt as though I had been, for some reason, insulted, but that there were expectations put on my voice because of the color of my skin, that I could not live up to. I constantly was referred to as having the “best of both worlds” since I was mixed race, and this was assumed of my vocal abilities as well. Despite the fact I had gone through the same music education as my peers for years, there was an assumption that I had a deeper understanding of blues and gospel, despite the fact they had never heard that from me. There was the assumption that I could mystically produce more soulful sounds, if I had the inclination to open my mouth and let out my inner “Big Mama Thorton”. This inability not



only placed me in a position to feel guilty that I was not raised in a black church or with any real affiliation to black musical spaces, comments like these also belittled the work that singers and artists in those genres did do. To assume that I, a thirteen-year-old girl raised in a primarily white community, would be able to produce blues and soul sounds with no practice, training, or education was absurd and implied that those who did make that music also needed no practice, training, or education. Additionally, the intent of a comment like this is to say, “You are different. You sound different and you will never sound like the rest of us.” This personal moment exemplifies the serious misconception that black musicality is genetically natural, not specifically created, developed, and passed on through generations. Although this situation is annoying, it is a microcosm of a much bigger and more dangerous issue. Arguments that suggest that people of African descent are genetically different are the same as those that argue that they are genetically dangerous, violent, and aggressive. African American music is the unique sound of America, a blending of traditional African values and Western European musical notions, yet those attributed to its creation are charged with the burden of the genre. When African American people are perceived as genetically inferior and dangerous, the music and sound that they produce can and will be perceived as dangerous and will be treated by the white population as such.

Because music is a practice found in every culture, there is a common misconception that music itself is a “universal language”. Although it is a medium that can cross time and space to touch listeners that the composer perhaps never even considered, the idealized concept that people from all over the world can hear one song, chord, note, or sound and interpret it the same is false. We do not all hear music the same because our experiences, way of living, cultures, values, backgrounds, histories, and educations are not all the same. Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, in her

book *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* defines this phenomenon as the ‘listening ear’<sup>11</sup>. Every person has their own set of experiences that determines how they interpret sound and music, thus why rap can sound like music to one person and noise to another or how opera can sound like music to one or droning to another. The ‘listening ear’ is constantly changing, learning, and expanding its range. Genre and the listening ear are not naturally occurring phenomena, given to infants at birth, passing to them from their parents genetically. These phenomena must be learned, constructed, and practiced. When music and the listening ear are applied to a group of people because of the color of their skin, it is not only frustrating but dangerous. To assume that every black person can dance because of some genetically gifted musical talent or natural rhythm, apart from being untrue, diminishes the work, time and practice black people throughout the diaspora have done to maintain, teach, and perfect their styles of music and dance. If it is accepted that musicality is not inherited through melanin but specifically preserved, constructed, and purposefully passed on, then the concept that any one genre is specific to one group of people must also be abolished. Music can unite a collective group’s ‘listening ear’ and can lead multiple people to interpret music the same or similarly but that is due to a group’s similarities in background, experiences, political agendas, and education, not a genetic bond through pigmentation.

In Jon Hale’s *The Freedom Schools: Student Activists in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement*<sup>12</sup>, he shows how white and African American teacher activists used unique teaching strategies to inspire student activism. Many of these techniques held their roots in “traditional

---

<sup>11</sup> Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line*, 7-8.

<sup>12</sup> Jon Hale, *Freedom Schools: Student Activists in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement*, (Columbia University Press, 2018), 134.

African education” techniques. For example, the students gained a unique insight into their own power, taking tactics that they learned in the classroom and immediately applying them to the real world. “...local police officers arrested students for attempting to desegregate public spaces and even for distributing voter registration literature throughout the summer campaign. The students engaged in political activity that put them in the same line of fire as older activists”. By providing lessons and allowing those lessons to be applied beyond just theory, students were able to learn how their own agency affected their realities. Later in this chapter we will further dissect how important the concept of applying lessons learned directly to real life situations, is to traditional African educational practices. Freedom Schools were a pillar holding up the intentions of the Summer of Freedom in 1964, one of the most massive voting registration initiatives in American history. Under the instruction of the Council of Federated Organizations, a coalition which included SNCC, CORE, SCLC, and the NAACP, Freedom Schools were an intrinsic part of their goals. They recognized that students would be politicized without their consent, so they aimed to provide students agency in that politicization. The murder of Emmet Till in 1955 made it clear to COFO leaders that the bodies of black children, unless given the tools and agency to resist, would always be disposable. By incorporating traditional African educational thought, curriculums that value these students as black American citizens, providing necessary critical thinking skills, and giving students a sense of responsibility not only towards their fellow students but for their community and race as a whole, Freedom Schools essentially trained the next generation of African American resistance.

Using African ideologies within the classroom is a tradition amongst black educators that has continued on for decades. According to Lisa Delpit in her *Multiplication is for White People:*

*Raising Expectations for Other People's Children*,<sup>13</sup> schools across America who have used similar techniques to the Civil Rights Movement's Mississippi Freedom Schools have produced prolific results. "Sankofa Shule, a public, African-centered, charter school in Lansing, Michigan, produced low-income African American students who read two to four levels above grade level, who did algebra and calculus in grade school, and who outscored the Lansing school district and the state of Michigan on the state accountability test (MEAP) in 2000 in mathematics and writing."

In this work I aim to continue this tradition of African American activism using an African lens, in order to examine African American music making. By examining the processes of African American music making through the lens of traditional African educational values, we can better understand how musical production is constructed within these communities. This is not to say that all African communities and nations had the exact same values and traditions. This simply argues that many African communities, as diverse as they were and are, do have similar and unifying traditions about education that can be used to examine African American communities today. Like African American culture, African education is constantly changing, mixing, growing, and expanding and I do not aim to argue that all African nations have the exact same cultural values that were perfectly transplanted to the Americas through slavery. I am not arguing or comparing, as many have done, African musical styles and African American musical styles. I am examining how African American music is constructed, and for what purpose music is used, and how African Americans continue to construct the American sound. By looking through this theoretical lens of African educational values we can see that African American music making is not passed on genetically but purposefully. Although connecting traditional

---

<sup>13</sup> Lisa Delpit, *Multiplication is for White People: Raising Expectations for Other People's Children*, (New Press, 2013), 33.

African education practices and African American music making may seem like a leap, I believe it is necessary to prove how African American music construction is perpetuated in order to understand the fluidity and burden of genre. Additionally, there is a history within America of black activists adopting educational tools from Africa when they find the educational values of the West unusable for the purposes of the education they are attempting to build and pass on, as Hale's book proves. This also continues in the tradition of African American music making itself. When the tools provided no longer work for African Americans, we find new ones. With an understanding that genre is a non-linear way to travel through time, when African American music making is adopted by the mainstream (white) population, so often the tools and music are no longer doing the work they were meant to do in the first place and must be recreated, thusly becoming something new to be mined and adopted and exploited by the mainstream population. This paper aims to find alternate tools through which to understand the process of this constant creating and recreating of black musicality. I hope to continue that tradition to better explain African American music making and make clear that de-essentializing black music making does not mean that there are not serious consequences and burdens of genre that come with the understanding that genre is a construct. Black music is constantly being policed, controlled, and systematically destroyed by oppressive forces that *hear* African American people as different, threatening, inferior and dangerous. So as black music is working to constantly reinvent itself and thus be a never-ending resource for white exploitation, it is simultaneously a space from which the mainstream can judge, hate, and fear.

There are three major techniques and ideologies that were used throughout African communities to educate their next generation that will be discussed in this paper. The first traditional African educational value seen in African American music making is the concept that

all skills learned must be immediately applied to life. In Samuel Floyd's *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States*<sup>14</sup> the author writes how African music can be incredibly utilitarian. It can be used for ceremonies such as rites of passage and religious practices, but also for the more mundane, everyday purposes, such as labor, bathing, courtship, cooking, etc. Music was utilized by everyone in the community and at a multitude of different times. Although there were members of the community who specialized in music, such as griots, they were not the only ones expected to participate in music making. It was a practice that nearly every member of the community had to have some level of skill in order to participate. Many African communities used instruments such as the 'talking drum' to convey messages over significant distances to communicate to other communities. Floyd explains that using musical sounds to communicate was a technique continued in slavery. "There were cries, field cries, hunting cries, and street cries, the character of each matching its function." Music making was a highly valued cultural ability that created a sort of language that more easily expressed thoughts and feelings rather than just speaking them. "In the circumstances of slavery, the spiritual was the transplanted Africans' primary means of expressing their current struggles and fulfillments while maintaining contact with the traditions and meanings of the past."<sup>15</sup> African enslaved peoples in the Americas taught the next generation to emote in a way that both connected them to their past culture and could surreptitiously be misunderstood by slave owners' uninformed listening ear. It was a skill that would be learned and be immediately applied as enslaved people had very little access to other forms of self-expression.

---

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States*, (Oxford University Press, 1997), 46.

<sup>15</sup> Floyd, 46.

This ability to immediately apply music making skills in everyday life is a practice seen in African American communal life today. In a viral 2018 YouTube video<sup>16</sup> a class of African American children is found celebrating after they find out that they will be attending a screening of the newly released film *Black Panther*<sup>17</sup>. Over twenty children collectively create a beat and using both their bodies (stomping, hand clapping, dancing) and their voices (“Aye”, whooping, and hollerin’) they can use the assumed language of their shared black musicality to express their celebration. What is also important to note about this video is the age of the children. Most appear to be under ten years old. The fact that these children are immediately, without any hesitation, able to collectively produce music implies that their musical education has been so thorough that it can be used to communicate and express emotions just as easily as speaking would be. Unlike that of many Western European cultures, music making is not something that must be practiced by the few who are deemed gifted, given months if not years of practice, and then performed for a silent, admiring audience. There is nothing inferior or superior about the two different ways of engaging with music, they are simply different and serve different purposes. African American music making, like traditional African music making, is for all to participate in. This video exemplifies how music, and therefore the education of learning these musical styles, is directly applied to everyday life. These students took the tools they had learned and directly applied it during a time when the skills were most needed.

The second traditional African educational practice is that anybody and everyone is a teacher. Learning came from everywhere and most importantly from anyone. “Parents, guardians, relatives and a wider circle of kinsmen in Igboland consider it a sacred trust of

---

<sup>16</sup> “Kids Dance for Joy after Getting 'Black Panther' Tickets” YouTube Video, 0:41, posted by “USA Today”, February 6, 2018, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=4xm67vTnFjw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4xm67vTnFjw).

<sup>17</sup> *Black Panther*. Directed by Ryan Coogler. Disney, 2018.

discharging their obligations as it concerned the socialization of the Igbo child. As a matter of fact, the entire village took part in the socialization process.”<sup>18</sup> Learning, unlike in Western education, did not happen only during a designated portion of the day with one person who was charged with teaching. Learning was the responsibility of the entire community. Learning did not only occur between adults and children but amongst children themselves. In the novel, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, he narrates a moment in which two brother-like companions engage in education. “Okonkwo’s son, Nwyoeye, who was two years younger, became quite inseparable from him [Ikemefuna] because he seemed to know everything. He could fashion out flutes from bamboo stems and even from the elephant grass. He knew the names of all the birds and could set clever traps for the little bush rodents. And he knew which trees made the strongest bows,”<sup>19</sup> Here we see learning and teaching happening not between child and teacher or child and parent but among peers.

In Kyra Gaunt’s *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop*<sup>20</sup> she explains that black musicality is something that is purposefully created and passed on. Gaunt shows that black musicality is not only passed on from parent to child or teacher to student but can be taught by anybody and practiced with anybody, just as can be seen in traditional African education. Her book focuses on the musicality of young black girls through games such as double-dutch and hand-clap games. While many hand-clap games, rhymes, and patterns can be taught between mother and daughter, there is a lot of learning occurring between peers. Often slightly older girls will teach younger girls a new rhyme to a hand-clap game or a

---

<sup>18</sup> Timothy G. Reagan, *Non-Western Educational Traditions: Local Approaches to Thought and Practice*, (Routledge, 2018), 68.

<sup>19</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, (Penguin Books, 2018), 28.

<sup>20</sup> Gaunt, *Games Black Girls Play*, 56-87.



new combination within double-dutch. The game is then taught to other girls in the same age group so that everyone can participate. Classic games such as *Miss Mary Mack*, are often taught from mother to daughter but new games can be created and taught based off new songs from the radio or television. What is also important to note about all this peer learning is that once the game has been taught amongst a group of girls, it can often change, develop, or pieces of the new rhyme can be used to create a completely new game. This exemplifies the fact that musicality and culture is never stagnant. *Miss Mary Mack* is a rhyme that can be heard in cities all over America. However, there are different patterns of hand movements, rhymes, and rhythms that are utilized throughout the game. Just because one girl knows how to play *Miss Mary Mack* in Atlanta, Georgia does not mean they immediately know how to play the game in Harlem, New York. The transplanted girl would need to be taught the subtle differences in how to play in the new location, and her new peers would be able to do so. It would be the responsibility of the new community to teach her how to participate in this game that is played constantly at school, on weekends, after school, to fill boredom, and to engage with communal music making. It would be a skill deemed necessary to be successful within the new community.

Lastly, in traditional African education, oral traditions were not only a key element in their education system but were often deemed superior to written traditions for many reasons. “Proverbs and riddles are used to hide a saying from the ordinary turn of mind.”<sup>21</sup> Using proverbs created a language in which one could quickly convey a moral and all those around were expected to understand it within the context of the situation. In *Things Fall Apart* there are dozens of proverbs. For example, “When mother-cow is chewing grass its young ones watch its

---

<sup>21</sup> Reagan, *Non-Western Educational Traditions*, 69.

mouth.”<sup>22</sup> This would mean that children are always watching, learning, and copying what their parents do. Instead of literally explaining the entire situation and having to analyze its implications, everyone understood quickly what was to be interpreted about that moment with a simple proverb.

When Africans were brought to the shores of what is now the United States, slave owners actively attempted to remove African culture from captured Africans. They made it nearly impossible for African people to communicate with one another in their first languages as many African people on one plantation did not speak the same language and were not from the same region. Thus, the newly formed “African Americans” took the European language that was available to them and created their own dialects, combining English with terms from their homeland. However, African people were not blank slates. They were not empty buckets in which slave owners could pour whichever information they wanted. African people maintained their ideologies and fused them with the new ones they were presented with. Although they would lose most of their home languages, they maintained their deep appreciation for oration. Oration, fables, myth, legends, and song remained a major way in which enslaved peoples communicated what cultural traits were valued within their community. Fables like Br’er Rabbit were used to emphasize how best to survive in the society in which they lived.<sup>23</sup> The usage of tales like these were, and still are, highly emphasized oral skills within African communities. While it is dangerous and limiting when racist systems essentialize black people as natural orators, it is important to recognize that African Americans held onto these oratory skills both because they were purposefully passed down as traditions and were necessary for survival. With

---

<sup>22</sup> Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 71.

<sup>23</sup> Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 35-57.

slave owners controlling nearly all aspects of African American life, secrecy was vital to the survival of black people and black culture. Not every African American is a great orator or even has the desire to be so, just as not every African American is a great musician or dancer. However, these skills were and are, culturally valued; a practice, varied in a multitude of ways across time and space, that African Americans may choose to participate in if they are so inclined.

Oratory skills were a necessity in African American life not only because it was a survival skill that was important in African life but because enslaved peoples were not permitted to learn how to read and write. In the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*, Douglass explains why slave owners refused to allow their slaves to learn to read and write. “‘Now,’ said he, ‘if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy.’<sup>24</sup>” Teaching enslaved peoples would not benefit the purpose of slave owners which was to literally work them to death. Therefore, the only way African Americans could educate themselves and their children was through oration.

Oration in a traditional African context also valued the importance of performance and the ritual that surrounded it. Unlike a book or written histories, oration relies on the performance. “Oral literature is by definition dependent on a performer who formulates it in words on a specific occasion—there is no other way in which it can be realized as a literary product...without its oral realization and direct rendition by singer or speaker, an unwritten literary piece cannot

---

<sup>24</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*, (Chelsea House, 1988), 64.

easily be said to have any continued or independent existence at all.”<sup>25</sup> Oral traditions require both performance and communal participation. There needs to be at least two individuals engaging for the transaction of information to take place. Additionally, quick usage of literary elements such as emphasis and sarcasm are more readily available as tools for a performer whereas things like tone can be lost in written literature. In African American music making the performance element is vital to the understanding of lyrics, intent, and meaning. In Angela Davis’ *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* she claims that there has been a gross misinterpretation of Bessie Smith’s songs that tackle serious concepts such as domestic violence. For example, in the song *Outside of That* Bessie Smith sings,

*“I said for fun I don’t want you no more  
And when I said that I made sweet papa sore  
He blacked my eye, I couldn’t see  
Then he pawned the things he gave to me  
But outside of that, he’s all right with me”*<sup>26</sup>

A poor interpretation (one that does not interpret lyrics with the performance) of this would say that Smith is fine with the fact that her partner beats her and sells her possessions because it is “all right” with her. However, if this piece is performed with the inflections intended by Smith, there should be a sense of irony and sarcasm to its performance. “But outside of that, he’s all

---

<sup>25</sup> Reagan, *Non-Western Educational Traditions*, 11.

<sup>26</sup> Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude ‘Ma’ Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, (Vintage Books, 1998), 27-28.

right with me,” should be interpreted as these moments of abuse are *not* appropriate, safe, or anything any woman should have to experience. However, this interpretation could be completely overlooked if one does not see the piece performed or listen to Bessie Smith’s recording. Oral traditions rely upon performance. This is a tradition that can be seen in both traditional African education and within the construction of African American music. Again, I emphasize Sterling Brown’s words to Amiri Baraka, “This is the history. This is your history, my history, the history of the Negro people”.<sup>27</sup> American history is African American music. To understand America, one needs to understand African American music for that is where lasting African educational tradition told us to write it.

These oratory skills continue to remain a necessity in black performance and politics which are intrinsically linked in Shana Redmond’s *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora*. In this book, Redmond states, “The movement of music-not simply in response to its rhythms but toward collective action and new political modalities-is the central exposition of Anthem.”<sup>28</sup> In her book she shows how political movements (from the Civil Rights to the Black Power Movement and onwards) have used certain songs to unite and educate black political theories. She uses such examples as Nina Simone’s *Young, Gifted, and Black* as a way to teach black pride and that “black is beautiful”. Redmond also focuses on Public Enemy’s *Fight the Power*. “Public Enemy makes ready use of iconography and period language, from the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) colors of red, black, and green to the Black Panther rebel yell “power to the people”, thereby announcing an engagement

---

<sup>27</sup> Baraka, *Blues People*, ix.

<sup>28</sup> Shana L. Redmond, *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora*, (New York University Press, 2014), 1.

with previous struggles even as they mount their own.”<sup>29</sup> Music and oration have been vital parts of African Americans’ political advancement; used as vehicles to pass on black theory and ideologies to the community at large, and younger generations. This requires the listening ear of the community. In order for these moments to be understandable to the target audience, musicians must use a library of different musical skills and an historical musical lineage to best convey these meanings. This can only be achieved by purposefully and intentionally creating and using black musicality.

African American music is not inheritable through genetics but instead is purposefully created, maintained, and practiced through generational influence. Therefore no one person is bound to any genre of music unless they choose to be, or others choose to associate a population with a particular type of music. This is where perceptions and an examination of genre and categorization becomes important. In David Brackett’s *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* he argues that genre is a construction created by “...the networks of discourses, people, and institutions that produce the concept of a category that is accepted across a range of different sites...”<sup>30</sup> He uses the metaphor of a constellation to describe how genre is connected on a multitude of levels not simply on a straight line, easily traceable and discernable. All art is influenced by other artists. The reality of black music is that it is not stagnant and cannot be passed through melanin.

My own musical history and upbringing is a testament to this notion. My father, although being a black man raised on the South Side of Chicago, had two parents whose were classical musicians. My grandmother was an opera singer for the Chicago Lyric and my grandfather was a

---

<sup>29</sup> Redmond, *Anthem*, 262.

<sup>30</sup> Brackett, *Categorizing Sound*, 333.

trumpet player in World War II and a public-school band teacher in Chicago for over thirty years. The music my father played in our home was Mozart and Handel. Nothing sounds more like Christmas to me than Handel's *Messiah*. My mother, on the other hand, grew up attending the performing arts magnet high school, Cass Tech in Detroit where, as a white student, was the minority to people of color. She grew up in a more racially diverse musical space which expanded her listening ear and her musical values. She went on to be one of the only white students in the African dance troupe at the University of Michigan which helped her value the complexity and difficulty of other dances outside of her Western European dance training. Due to the diversity of the community in which she played, danced, worked, learned, grew, loved, and struggled she built a listening ear that understood the sounds and music that her peers did. Because of her listening ear she was able to pass on a preference and taste for Detroit Motown, 70's funk, and protest music to her biracial children. In my own musical upbringing, we can see that genre is not specific to any one type of person and one's listening ear is more than just one's assumed culture, but is rather the time, space, and influences to which that individual is exposed.

It is counterproductive to argue that any one person or artist should not have access to or be able to participate in and experiment with any genre. No population is more genetically inclined to any particular genre of music and although there are few academics who would argue this, these ideas continue to exist within the racial discourse of everyday life. However, although it is true that no musician can be contained by the social construction of genre, it is important to recognize that is true in theory, whilst in practice and throughout history, African Americans time after time have been denied entrance into what have been traditionally white, Western European musical and sonic spaces. Many white musicians feel free to be inspired by and enter traditionally black music making spaces without persecution or fear of violence. In fact, many

white musicians and even those who do not identify as musicians, can use traditionally African American music and sounds to bolster their own standing within the hierarchy of race. And this phenomenon does not live in a black and white binary. I argue that with the rise of genres like K-Pop we can actively see members from other populations push back against previously held stereotypes, such as the desexualization of Asian men, and use African American musicality to raise themselves out of these racist notions. White singers such as Miley Cyrus, Iggy Azalea, and Ariana Grande, use black music and black aesthetics to raise themselves up within the music industry while having little to no understanding about how and why this music was developed in the first place. Meanwhile, African Americans that sonically attempt to enter traditionally “white spaces”<sup>31</sup> are not granted access. The ebbing and flowing of music as it mixes and churns seems to only allow white musicians (and those populations held higher within the racial hierarchy) to safely flow into African American genres. This can be seen on two major levels. First, African Americans are not permitted to physically enter white spaces (neighborhoods, parks, schools, etc.) with their African American musicality without fear of being arrested, stalked, harmed, or even killed. Second, African Americans are barred from participating in traditionally white music making spaces (symphonies, operas, choirs, formal music education, record labels, radio stations, etc.) by being denied access both economically and socially. They are systematically removed from participating. This is accomplished by refusing to produce African American written compositions, the sexualization of African American performers, violence, and other tactics. Chapter two will examine these tactics of exclusion and harm applied specifically to African American opera singers.

---

<sup>31</sup> The term “white spaces” here does not refer to state sanctioned segregated locations. “White spaces” may be public locations that are however deemed unwelcoming to people of color by the white population.



When it comes to African Americans physically entering “white spaces” sonically, there is a long history of oppression. In the 1940’s, according to Richard Rothstein’s *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of how our Government Segregated America*<sup>32</sup>, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) adopted a policy called “blockbusting”. This was the act of frightening white homeowners into selling their homes due to the perception that African Americans were ‘infiltrating’ the neighborhood. White homeowners would then sell their homes at incredibly low prices and the FHA would resell the homes at inflated prices to African Americans. There were many tactics the FHA would employ in order to develop the perception that African Americans were moving into an area. One of these included hiring African Americans to play loud music on their radios while they drove around white neighborhoods. There has always been the sonic perception of race and this scenario shows how fear of African Americans and the perception that they and their music are dangerous, effectively hurt both black and white people economically.

In November of 2012, nine months after the murder of Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, a seventeen-year-old Floridian was murdered by Michael Dunn at a gas station after refusing to reduce the volume of his music. Stoever says this of the situation: “Without even consciously expressing the sentiment, white Americans often feel entitled to respect for their sensibilities, sensitivities, and tastes, and to their implicit, sometimes violent, control over the soundscape of an ostensibly ‘free’, ‘open’, and ‘public’ space.<sup>33</sup>” This sentiment is one that has existed throughout all of African American history. Black inferiority is not only seen but heard. The perception that their sonic presence is dangerous and something to be feared is determined

---

<sup>32</sup> Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, (Liveright Publishing Company, 2017), 95-96.

<sup>33</sup> Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 2.

historically and complicates the ever-flowing production of genre and music. There is a heavy and dangerous burden that any African American must carry once they have engaged in traditionally African American genres, one that white artists, no matter how inspired they are by black music, will never have to bear. In Leon F. Litwack's *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* he states, "Every black child would come to appreciate the terrible unfairness and narrowness of that world-the limited options, the need to curb ambitions, to contain feelings, and to weigh carefully every word, gesture and movement when in the presence of whites".<sup>34</sup> When these two forces met there was a dissonance in how Dunn heard Davis. Davis refused to yield his soundscape at that gas station in November and his murderer, a 47-year-old white man, so socialized to demand the respect, obedience, and silence of black people, shot this child dead for it.

Back in 2004 when that girl asserted that the judges would be able to hear my blackness during my audition, my musical soundscape was a threat to her at that moment, and she took that time to remind me of my place within the hierarchy of race and sound. Did this girl intend to alienate me before an audition in hopes of improving her own chances? Did she wish to imply that I was naturally more gifted than her, so if I won there was a logical and racial explanation rather than the possibility, I had just worked harder or simply sang better that day? Or perhaps she wanted to imply that the judges would know I was black and even if I was not as talented, I would still win under some perverse system of affirmative action. It is impossible to know her exact racist motivation, but the underlying truth is that she believed I was sonically different because of the color of my skin and that was a threat to her and her goals. Jordan Davis dared to

---

<sup>34</sup> Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*, (Vintage Books, 1998), 7.

impose his soundscape on Michael Dunn with much more devastating consequences. Although these two situations are not comparable in their results, the underlying racist ideology exists. Perceiving African American music as natural, not only belittles the work and labor African Americans have done to create that music, but when a genre is perceived as genetic to a certain people and that people is perceived as inferior and dangerous, that music acts as a battle cry to the listening ear of white people; something to be perceived as an attack, defended against, stamped out, and silenced.

## Chapter 2

### Hear My Silence: A Burden of Genre and an African American Experience through the American Music Education System

The first live performance I ever attended was for my thirteenth birthday. My mother took me to see Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Cats*. I was completely obsessed with the musical after attending this performance. My DVD of the London cast was nearly dead after the year due to how many times I watched it. When my choir teacher announced that we would be performing *Honk Jr.* for the Spring musical, my love for *Cats* just about exploded. *Honk Jr.* was essentially the story of the Ugly Duckling, but the villain was a cat who wanted to eat the hero for lunch. She had one brassy song where the main tag line was "You can play with your food before you eat it." It was a badly written musical, but I wanted nothing more than to play this role. I practiced for weeks before the audition and I was so excited when I actually got the part. Dress rehearsal came and I proudly walked out in my literal cat suit that my neighbor had sewn for me, feeling like the most talented, amazing person to grace the hallways of Briarhill Middle School. However, my teacher, Mrs. Young, looked at me and in front of an entire room of white, middle school girls (girls who had previously teased me by putting gum and Velcro in my hair) said, "Allison, you look like a sex kitten." Girls began to snicker, and I felt my face get hot and my eyes fill up with tears. This was the first time I can remember feeling sexualized and it suddenly felt as though someone had switched on a light and I could see my body for the first time. I could see how it was different from the other girls and it was amazing to me that I had never noticed before. For the performance, I wore a long black skirt over my outfit, which I hated because it now looked nothing like the costumes from *Cats*, but what I really remember was the first time a teacher would use her power to racially hurt and sexualize me. When Serena Williams in 2018

was banned from the French Open due to her “catsuit” outfit, I could empathize only too well.<sup>35</sup> When Mrs. Young sexualized a black, thirteen-year-old girl in front of her peers, it was not merely one teacher making a misstep. Like Williams, this moment was emblematic of the systemic sexualization of African American women and girls.

In this chapter I aim to examine through autoethnography how racial and sexual discrimination and trauma can follow a young musician from her early music lessons on through to her professional life. I use autoethnography because others with stories still fear repercussions from within the field. This chapter does takes time to acknowledge that African American communities not only have less access to classical music education and bel canto vocal training economically, thus narrowing the pool of African American opera singers, but additionally is an exploitative and predatorial economic system that does damage to all students who come from less economically privileged backgrounds. The main focus of this chapter is primarily to question through autoethnography how the racism and sexism of teachers, professors, conductors, peers, administrators, and fellow musicians (the music education system) works to erase and remove African American musicians from the stage. This chapter argues that the American music education institution purposefully, systematically, economically, and sometimes violently removes women of color from the opera stage. In this chapter I examine how the institution works to protect abusers and silence those most vulnerable to them.

First, I would like to explain the logistical process and economic pitfalls of participating in the American Opera System. American opera is taught and learned in the university. It is not

---

<sup>35</sup> Samuel Lovett, “*Serena Williams banned from wearing ‘Black Panther’ catsuit at future French Open, says tournament chief*”, (Independent, August 24, 2018), <https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/tennis/serena-williams-black-panther-catsuit-bodysuit-french-open-banned-president-a8505911.html> .

completely unheard of for a singer to simply take voice lessons but that would be a serious outlier. Whether education is taking place at a music conservatory like Boston Conservatory, Berklee, or Julliard, or at traditional state schools like the University of North Texas, the University of Michigan, or the University of Kansas, the tradition of bel canto and operatic training is primarily being taught in collegiate institutions. It is difficult (if not impossible) for voice students to be accepted at collegiate level programs who have not previously been taking voice lessons during high school. This makes sense to a certain degree. It would be hard to be recruited for a collegiate basketball team if you could not afford to be on your high school team. Is it possible that a recruiter could just so happen to see a young “talent” playing on a lonely basketball court? Maybe in a Hollywood movie but in reality, there is a very specific and developed system that recruits young athletes and it rarely benefits the interests of the athletes. Although the sports industry’s recruiting system is more advanced and predatorial to an outrageous extent, I believe there are comparisons to be made when it comes to African American opera singers being used by the industry and ending up with little to nothing at the end.<sup>36</sup>

Voice lessons can cost anywhere from \$40 to \$80 (or more) an hour, which would usually occur once a week (although it could be more often) and this investment never stops. Voice lessons are not taken for a couple of years before and during college but are required for well over a decade, or decades. This is where the training happens. After a student graduates with their degree in vocal performance (assuming they have survived the emotional trauma of being black in an opera program, which will be discussed later), it is expected that one will continue this education and apply for a Master’s degree in the same field. There is very recently

---

<sup>36</sup> William C. Rhoden, “*Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete*”, (Three Rivers Press, 2006), 171-196.

a trend of skipping this step and continuing to take lessons alone but by far, continuing “formal” education is the preferred route as schools are also where connections may be forged for hopeful employment. After one graduates and receives their Masters, then comes the audition process, which actually begins with Young Artist Programs. Young Artist Programs are pay-to-sing music camps that can last anywhere from four to nine weeks during the summer months. A singer usually attends these programs anywhere throughout the last year or two of their undergraduate study until a couple of years after their Master’s is completed. As these are “young” artist programs, singers can age out of these camps, but they are a necessary part of the audition cycle. During these programs, young singers sing for free and have the opportunity to potentially meet directors, composers, and other prominent musicians within the music business in hopes that when professional auditions come in the Fall season, they will have an advantage over the other singers. These programs can cost upwards of \$5,500<sup>37</sup> and these students will most likely be losing money since they will not be capable of working during this time.

Finally, there are the actual audition costs. When it comes to auditioning, there are a couple of options. One can either decide to move to New York City where opera companies from all over the country hold auditions. Apart from the cost of moving, it is no secret that living in New York City is expensive. The other option, if one cannot live in New York City, is to travel every Fall to audition for either professional opera companies or summer programs. At these auditions a singer will most likely be asked to pay for the pianist who would be accompanying their audition program, but there are additional audition fees that are used to compensate the judges for their time. This can cost anywhere between \$25 - \$40 per audition and the more auditions you do, the better your chances are of getting hired. Doing eleven or more auditions is

---

<sup>37</sup> “Artist Applicants: Costs.” Seagle Music Colony. <https://seaglecolony.org/applicants/> (December 10, 2019)”.

conservative. It is not unheard of, if not expected, that a singer will spend thousands of dollars in one audition cycle, and this obviously has no promise of work at the end. In what other field do applicants have to pay for an interviewer to interview them? With traveling costs, accompanist fees, audition fees, and Young Artist Programs, the cost of simply trying to get hired for the skill you have spent years learning is insurmountable. It is nearly impossible to enter the American opera tradition without money from either familial support or a “patron”.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, Young Artist Programs, colleges, voice teachers’, coaches’, and directors’ income, are, in part, funded from the never-ending amount of fees that singers must pay in order to participate. This means, that people who are entrusted with the well-being and, sometimes, the trajectory of a young singer’s career, have no incentive to relay realistic expectations to students because students are helping fund them. And although students in other majors obviously pay tuition for their college degrees and not everyone proceeds into a career that is related to that field, if an accounting major gets a summer internship, they may not get paid but they do not have to pay \$5,500 to be at the internship. Not many job applications require you to pay \$50 or more to send in your cover letter and application. This hypothetical accounting student, if they realize halfway through their degree that they are not as gifted in math as they thought they were, then they have also taken other general education courses that would allow them to switch majors and find something they may be better suited to. Music schools, like conservatories or programs like the University of Kansas, do not require math, history, or science in a lot of their curriculums. So even if a student realizes they are getting “weeded out”, unless they drop in the first semester, a student has very little choice but to finish. Not only would that student have to start over, adding more debt to

---

<sup>38</sup> The system of patronage is an additional system that has been used to fund opera for hundreds of years. It is a system that, like the American Opera System and the American Music Education System can be easily manipulated by abusers to take advantage of young, desperate singers. I would like to later add more historical context and research about patronage in later iterations of this research.



their name, but that student has not had the opportunity to explore other venues of education that they may have been interested in. There is a system of exploitation where singers are required to spend money in order to participate despite the fact that the hopes of seeing a future in that field is unlikely to materialize, especially for African American singers, and the system benefits from students who continue to try and fail. There are almost no benefits to schools being upfront about how the audition system works because it relies on the money from those who have not yet succeeded or on those who will not succeed in making money with the skills that they have gained. At the beginning of music school, no professor told me how this system worked. It was explained that singing opera was a difficult and competitive field, but no one explained the financial burden a singer must take on if they wish to sing opera professionally.

Singers who are less economically privileged virtually cannot participate in this field. Students who are able to pay for voice lessons or are “lucky” enough to get into music school despite not taking those lessons throughout high school, will find it extremely difficult to participate in the system of auditioning post-graduation. It speaks to the obvious gatekeeping and inaccessible nature of opera and classical music. I was afforded the opportunity to take voice lessons and enter the University of Kansas School of Music. However, once I got to college and the fees of tuition and auditioning were on me, it was impossible for me to continue in a career in opera.

Nina Simone, in her own words, began playing piano at the young age of three or four and she had every intention of being a classical concert pianist. In the Netflix documentary, *What Happened, Miss Simone?*<sup>39</sup> Simone discusses that she began classical training when she was seven with a white teacher who had seen her playing in church and although she loved the music

---

<sup>39</sup> “*What Happened, Miss Simone?*” Directed by Liz Garbus. Netflix, 2015.

of Bach and Beethoven that due to the intensive training she felt herself becoming increasingly isolated from the black community from which she came. While training in high school, with the help of her teacher, she was able to save money to attend Julliard in New York City for a year and a half. After that time, the money ran out and although she applied for other scholarships, she did not receive them due to the color of her skin. In order to make money she began to play in clubs in Atlantic City where she played more traditionally black genres for the masses. Years later, after she had become a celebrity in jazz and blues music, she finally had the opportunity to achieve a lifelong dream of appearing at Carnegie Hall. She wanted to be the first black female to play classical music at Carnegie Hall, however she was not permitted or hired to play Bach but instead sang the more romantic popular hits that had appealed to white audiences. Although she had achieved her goal, she resented the fact that although she had gained entrance spatially, she had not gained entrance through the genre of her choosing. This rejection, despite her success, stayed with her throughout her career and life. African American musicians throughout history have worked and sacrificed to gain the “proficiency” that classical training can provide<sup>40</sup> and although it can benefit their artistic production, they are rarely allowed to perform these genres in venues in front of predominantly white audiences where classical music is traditionally performed. What does it do to a musician and singer to fight and gain this proficiency, to separate and isolate themselves from their community and people for this art form, only to realize that both economically and socially they were never going to be accepted, no matter how hard they had worked?

In an article by Farrah Jasmine Griffin titled, *When Malindy Sings: A Meditation on Black Women’s Vocality*, she explains how black female voices have been utilized through great

---

<sup>40</sup> Baraka, *Blues People*, 110

national tragedy. “The image of the ‘mother of the nation’ is one that allows this construct to figure itself as reproduced. But the spectacle of the singing black woman at times of national crisis does not represent the ‘mother of nation’; instead that spectacle sometimes invokes a figure that can make no claims on the family unit, though she is ‘just like one of the family.’ A figure that serves the unit, who heals and nurtures it but has no rights or privileges within it- more mammy than mother.”<sup>41</sup> I felt tears well up and rage hit my chest. I felt myself thinking, “How could they take this from us?” How could they take our voices, twist and distort them into something so unlike what we wanted? This is not to say that Griffin’s article itself is wrong or hurtful, but gaining the understanding is a painful process. Griffin additionally theorizes the role that black women’s vocality has played within the African American freedom struggle, so her analysis is not completely “cynical”, as she describes it, but she does call into question the audience and how that audience interprets black women’s voices. In an interview with Nina Simone she explains how freedom feels for her when she is on stage and that freedom to her is “no fear”.<sup>42</sup> I have felt that. I have felt the relaxing yet exhilarating freedom of singing and saying exactly what I wanted to say. To present myself, exactly how I wanted to be seen and to live for a moment without politics; seemingly unburdened by the expectations of others and no longer silenced by society; to sing songs of a family I had never truly known. However, through academia and black studies, it feels like even these moments are snatched from me. They slip through my fingers as the waves of racism sweep over my past performing body and I understand that it is never not political when it comes to white consumption of black artistic productivity. I was the one black girl in vocal performance at the University of Kansas in my

---

<sup>41</sup> Farah Jasmine Griffin, *When Malindy Sings: A Meditation on Black Women’s Vocality*, (Columbia University Press, 2004), 104.

<sup>42</sup> “Garbus, “*What Happened, Miss Simone?*”, (Netflix, 2015)

graduating class and therefore it was assumed I would be doing spirituals in my senior recital. My black mixed body represented the majority of the “diversity” within my department at music school and there was no one around me to open my eyes to the trap of respectability<sup>43</sup> I had not only fallen into but had been trained to create for myself.

My very participation in opera, has been called into question as I think about why I began voice lessons so early in my young life at the age of eleven. As Simone says, “You must question all the things you’ve known all your life.” It is complicated because I wanted to take voice lessons, and I am incredibly privileged to have had them at my disposal. My interracial parenting placed me in voice lessons because I was both loved and supported (both emotionally and financially) but also because they believed that the way to support my interests was to “legitimize” it through study and training. This is not meant to be a critique of my parents’ decisions but is more of an examination of how black performance of respectability has affected my sense of loss, anger, and pain in hopes that other black girls and black singers will feel justified in their feelings in a way that took me twenty-eight years and \$30,000 of debt to find.

I feel the deep cut of loss as I begin to examine how I have been groomed for respectability. I feel the loss of my people. I have always felt a deep disconnect from the black community and I know that apart from being half white, the performance of respectability has kept me silent and thusly away from a community. The grooming and work that has been done through music and opera to be what a singer and opera singer should be had me attempting to keep my mouth shut and has stopped me from participating. When my high school put on a nearly all white casting of *The Wiz*, I did not audition. My white friends and peers asked why I didn’t audition as this part was “made for me”. Why? So, I could get a role solely because I am

---

<sup>43</sup> Lashawn Harris, *Sex Workers, Psychics, and Numbers Runners: Black Women in New York City’s Underground Economy*, (University of Illinois Press, 2016), 5-6.

black and let everyone know. I had auditioned for a countless number of musical theater roles and solos and had never been given a part. My training in respectable silence, stopped me from engaging in this highly troubled and problematic performance. Additionally, a deep shame has always crippled me vocally as I cannot and have never been trained to produce traditionally African American vocal sounds. I never grew up on blues, jazz, hip-hop, or rap. Those had no place in my respectable life. I was not trained to know black music and so I could not produce the sounds required in *The Wiz*. To be fair, neither could any of the white high school performers, but they were not expected to. The unrealistic expectation that would be placed on my voice if I were to audition for a role weighed heavily on me. And worse. What if I auditioned and did not get the title role? How deeply embarrassed would I have been to audition for *The Wiz* as one of only two black girls and NOT gotten it? It would be unequivocal proof that I was not a good enough singer. However, as I watched this performance on opening night, I felt so silenced. Who was I to turn to, to discuss my hurt feelings? All my mentors and choir teachers were the directors. People I was told to trust had placed me in this position; both forcing myself to be left out and silenced, unable to access the vocabulary I now have to deconstruct these moments. And it is nearly impossible for any young, black singer to defend herself in moments like these because as every singer knows “there is someone behind you who would die to be here”. The constant threat of competition and replacement silences and disarms black vocalists. What are we supposed to do? Was Marian Anderson on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial supposed to reject that opportunity so she would not be placed in the position of the Mammy? Who would turn that down? We love to sing. I love singing but I cannot sing or perform or write anything without the burden of politicization. Who do I sing for? What do I represent in the eyes of the audiences that watch me? Why do they think I am there and can I even control that?

Racism and sexism in opera took away the tools I had so desperately tried to earn. I had clawed and fought to be acknowledged as a musician. How many times I had to bat away assumptions about what genre I engaged in with the ignorant reply, “No...I don’t sing R&B. I’m an *opera* singer.” A voice filled with indignation and arrogance. I look back at the woman I used to be and hear the confusion within her. I hear the frustration at the continuous assumptions of genre placed on my body coupled with the desire to separate myself from that kind of black singer. As I continue in black studies, to tear down these walls of respectability I have built around myself, it is a painful but necessary process. As I am forced to question ideas of “mastery” and who gets to be a “musician”, I understand but it hurts. I look around at majority white faces in a course on Power and Music, as they all agree that everyone and anyone can be a musician and I marvel at how easy it is for them to accept that when they do not know the sacrifices I have made to gain that title. They have not had to experience separating themselves from black genres and casting them away from themselves in hopes that they would then be acknowledged as a musician. It is easy to give up titles when you had not previously chosen your love of opera over the love of yourself or your color. It was my sophomore year of college when I went home in tears after finding out that I would again have to wear a wig for the upcoming opera. I tore at my relaxed hair as I cried and moaned that I hated my hair and that I hated being black. That all I wanted to do was sing and it was my blackness that made it clear to myself and every person in the opera department that I did not belong. I just wanted to be a musician and I wanted to give up my color and hair to do it. At that point, I thought it was my blackness that stopped me from being the musician I wanted to be, not that the school, program, and professors who were so entrenched in the racist notions of what an opera singer should be that they would

not let me exist as myself in this space. It is easy to give up titles like “musician” when they are assumed of you and hard when you have tried to sacrifice yourself in order to obtain them.

As I stand in front of the AUMI (Adaptive Use Musical Instrument), an instrument built to deconstruct concepts of mastery and accessibility, I feel awkward, uncomfortable, and silenced. The machine is a series of motion sensitive iPads, programmed to produce a multitude of different sounds. The performer is meant to appear in front of the iPad’s camera and move their body in order to activate certain points on the screen so that the sounds will activate. The sounds can range from piano chords, to spooky Halloween sounds like werewolves howling or chains clanking. The interface is difficult to control and therefore makes “mastering” the instrument nearly impossible, meaning that the intention is that this is an instrument that you cannot get much better at. The point is that practice, training, and technique is only marginally noticeable against a first-time user. As I glance around the classroom at my peers enjoying their experience in front of the instrument, I have zero desire to stand before the iPad, move my arms around, and proclaim that this is music making. My walls of respectability keep me toeing a ledge that I am resistant to jump off, because of the work and sacrifice it took to climb to the top. The instrument requires no breath control, technique, line, lift, resistance and I feel uncomfortable trying to express anything in front of it. Yet as painful and uncomfortable as this practice is, it is vital in understanding the social construct that is “mastery”. Why have I worked so hard to gain this status? This status did not deepen my love of music but rather separated and compartmentalized my body and mind, creating an incohesive black woman, singer, mixed girl, artist, and performer. This status is a part of what has broken me and required me to hide parts of myself – damaging my ability to be an honest artist; one that could have said something unique or maybe even important. I am attempting to bring those pieces together -to be fully who I am as

dangerous and precarious as my confidence feels. I attempt to write these experiences in a way to fully embrace myself as a full, intact, learned, and complete person with no pieces hidden and I believe a part of that needs to acknowledge my hesitations and journey to decolonization and consciousness.

James Levine was the conductor at the Metropolitan Opera in New York for nearly four decades. Arguably the most famous and well-respected conductor in America, (even non-opera goers potentially knew who he was having appeared in countless TV specials). I personally first remember him as the conductor from Disney's *Fantasia 2000*. However, in the post #MeToo movement, Levine was fired for sexual misconduct and harassment. After a New York Times piece accused Levine, the Met did an internal investigation that included over 70 different interviewees<sup>44</sup>. The details of this investigation were never released and after a forty-year career at the prestigious opera house, he was finally let go. The New York Times article explains how rumors had circulated around the conductor since the 1980's, how the Metropolitan Opera seemed to have been aware of the misconduct and goes into detail about some of the abuses that were expressed by a few, now very successful musicians. However, I am curious about those of his students who did not continue with their education after potential abuse occurred. Those who were willing to come forward were those who, despite their abuse, were able to continue on and have stunning careers despite their trauma. It is only decades after the abuse that these individuals both earned the social standing needed to be taken seriously and gained the courage to come forward with their stories. I argue that this is not merely one conductor but that this is the culture of opera and classical music, beginning with music education. Teachers, professors,

---

<sup>44</sup> Michael Cooper, "James Levine's Final Act at the Met Ends in Disgrace." (The New York Times, March 12, 2018) <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/12/arts/music/james-levine-metropolitan-opera.html>.



and conductors who wield such power over a young musician's life are capable of doing whatever they want and knowing that the system will defend them. As previously discussed, the economic pressures of being a singer, is enough to make vocalists desperate, and those in power are only too aware of this situation. It is in the very nature of how music is taught.

Unlike other fields of study where there are rules and regulations (although these rules are often broken) about the relationships between students and professors, at music school, the relationship is immediately more intimate. The bulk of work and study is done on an individual basis. Your advisor feels like more than a teacher. The intimate work in trying to learn how to create art, the amount of trust a student must give a teacher in order to produce sound, the vulnerability a young musician feels as they allow a teacher to not only hear their vocal mistakes and triumphs but to be solely in charge of how they progress and what their voice may eventually even sound like, makes a private tutor more than a teacher, but a mentor, a confidant, and a parental figure. Often so much of what a musician thinks of themselves and their own self-worth is based upon what their teacher thinks of them. If the key way you identify yourself is as a musician first, then the opinion of your teacher, who legitimizes that identity, wields a lot of control over that identity. This intimate relationship, that has been used to pass on the art of bel-canto and opera singing, allows space for misconduct and inappropriate behavior to run rampant. This is not to say that every student-teacher relationship is inappropriate, just that this space creates easy access for abusers.

The University of Kansas School of Music has had several *public* connections to sexual misconduct in the last several years. In an article in the Lawrence Journal World covering a protest by the Rock Chalk Invisible Jayhawk organization it is reported, "Several years ago a female student accused the professor listed by name of sexually harassing her, and she was

unhappy with how KU handled her complaint.” This town hall meeting, originally called to discuss race was live streamed. Although the article redacts the name of the accused professor, this professor continues to work at this University.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, according to the Journal World, former graduate student at the KU School of Music and Lawrence orchestra conductor, Carlos Espinosa, was sentenced to 31 months in prison for raping a 15-year-old girl he met online.<sup>46</sup> In a 2015 article, the University Daily Kansan reports that Rachel Frish was handcuffed and sexually battered after being lured to another student’s apartment under the guise of a voice lesson.<sup>47</sup> The Kansas City Star reports in 2015 that another student filed a lawsuit against a professor in the Theater Department, located in the same building as the School of Music, this student claimed this professor asked him to his home and sexually assaulted him.<sup>48</sup> And in 2013, I was physically assaulted by a graduate student backstage during a performance of *The Beggar’s Opera*.

As I waited with the rest of the chorus for our cue to go on stage, we all stood excitedly waiting to go on. We watched the action on stage from the wings and there was an on-stage slap. The tone backstage was lighthearted and jovial and after the slap, a graduate student looked at me and said, “That’s not how you hit a woman. This is.” He proceeded to slap me across the

---

<sup>45</sup> Sara Shepherd, “*Student-Led Rock Chalk Invisible Hawk Group Issues Diversity-Related Demands for KU; Here’s Some More Context.*” (Lawrence Journal-World, November 12, 2015), [https://www2.ljworld.com/weblogs/heard\\_hill/2015/nov/12/student-led-rockchalkinvisiblehawk-group/](https://www2.ljworld.com/weblogs/heard_hill/2015/nov/12/student-led-rockchalkinvisiblehawk-group/).

<sup>46</sup> Sara Shepherd, “*Former Lawrence Orchestra Conductor KU Instructor Sentenced to Prison for Sex Acts with Teen.*” (Lawrence Journal-World, July 6, 2018), <https://www2.ljworld.com/news/2018/jul/06/former-lawrence-orchestra-conductor-ku-instructor-sentenced-to-prison-for-sex-acts-with-teen/>.

<sup>47</sup> Riley Mortensen, “*Music School Community Struggles with Questions after Sexual Battery Case.*” (The University Daily Kansan, March 1, 2015), [http://www.kansan.com/news/music-school-community-struggles-with-questions-after-sexual-battery-case/article\\_100f7a06-c096-11e4-9322-ff8ab8ac4ba9.html](http://www.kansan.com/news/music-school-community-struggles-with-questions-after-sexual-battery-case/article_100f7a06-c096-11e4-9322-ff8ab8ac4ba9.html).

<sup>48</sup> Mará Rose Williams, “*Former Student Alleges KU Didn’t Investigate Claim a Professor Sexually Assaulted Him.*” (The Kansas City Star, April 5, 2017) <https://www.kansascity.com/news/local/article142823104.html>

face. The sound resounded through the hallway and suddenly the atmosphere went from jovial to silent and tense as maybe a dozen other chorus members watched my reaction. Despite the embarrassment, humiliation, and the sting in my cheek, I pretended everything was fine, blinked back my tears, accepted his apology, and went on stage. After the performance in the upcoming week, I proceeded to tell a trusted graduate student about the incident, and she encouraged me to report it to our mutual advisor. I did. As far as I know, nothing was ever done. I have since asked this advisor and although he claims to not remember, he assures me that he would have told the current chair of the department. That is the extent of my knowledge.

The idea that the Metropolitan Opera did not know that Levine was a serial abuser is preposterous. This behavior is a cultural element within the world of opera and classical music and trickles down into every Young Artist Program, conservatory, and music school. To be clear, it is not the fault of these institutions that there are abusers in their midst. However, it is the fault of the institutions that these abusers feel protected and safe to do their work and find their victims within its walls. These four articles were all published since 2015 and all have a connection to the University of Kansas School of Music. For every one of those students who came forward to press charges or tell their story, how many tried and were ignored? How many decided to say nothing at all? This amount of misconduct would seem to me evidence that at the very least, that KU School of Music and Murphy Hall has a serious problem. These incidents do not exist in a vacuum, merely evidence that there are a “few bad apples” or that music students must be liars. At the very least, why has the administration refused to connect these cases and investigate why there have been so many in a four-year span? It is my opinion that if the administration truly cared for the well-being of their students over the reputation of their professors and institution that action would be taken, and allegations would be taken seriously.

In November of 2017, the Boston Globe published an article expressing that three professors had been quietly let go from Boston's Berklee School of Music due to accusations of sexual harassment and/or assault against students.<sup>49</sup> In a later report by The Washington Post, the president of the conservatory, Roger Brown, released a statement that eleven professors had been let go due to sexual misconduct accusations since 2004.<sup>50</sup> The report in the Boston Globe details three of the assaults and one assailant who willingly provided an interview to the Globe implied that he could not have made advances on a student because his current girlfriend at the time, was more attractive than his victim. He also expressed beliefs that although students were off limits while in school, after graduation it was "open season," as though a diploma removes all the power disparities within that relationship. The nature of these assaults and the rhetoric surrounding them are disgusting. It was only after the Globe's report that the prestigious music school was forced to reckon with the misogynistic and abusive culture that festered within its halls. In October of 2018, the Berklee Institute of Jazz and Gender Justice was founded by Terri Lyne Carrington. On their website the institute states its vision as follows; "We will foster creative practice and scholarship in jazz within an integrated and egalitarian setting. We seek to engage ourselves and others in the pursuit of jazz without patriarchy and, in making a long-lasting cultural shift in jazz and other music communities, recognize the role that jazz can play in the larger struggle for gender justice."<sup>51</sup> The institute was welcomed with a buzz of excitement.

---

<sup>49</sup> Kay Lazar, "Berklee let teachers quietly leave after alleged sex abuse, and pushed students for silence" (Boston Globe, November 8, 2017), <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2017/11/08/berklee-college-lets-teachers-quietly-leave-after-alleged-sexual-abuse-students-least-one-found-another-teaching-job/yfCkCCmdJzxkiEgrQK4cWM/story.html>

<sup>50</sup> Sara Larimer, "Boston's Berklee College of Music reeling amid sexual misconduct allegations involving professors" (The Washington Post, November 14, 2017) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2017/11/14/bostons-berklee-college-of-music-reeling-amid-sexual-misconduct-allegations-involving-professors/>

<sup>51</sup> "Mission, Values, and Vision: Vision", (Berklee Institute of Jazz and Gender Studies, December 9, 2019) <https://www.berklee.edu/jazz-gender-justice/mission-vision-values>

The institute not only provides spaces for female student musicians at the conservatory to perform but brings in prominent female musicians of diverse races to put on performances. Prominent figures in the field of race and music such as previously discussed, Farah Jasmine Griffin, gave keynote remarks at the institute's opening. And although offering creative spaces for women and women of color to perform and be valued within a school is important, there are no follow-up reports about the impact the institute has had within the last year. All reports on the new institute are dated 2018, meaning the institute has been running for over a year. Has the Berklee Institute of Jazz and Gender Justice worked to change a culture of predatory professors, misogynistic rhetoric, and a music system that leaves students open to being taken advantage of? Is it too early to say? Is this throwing money on a problem without actually changing the systemic issues of music education and the role it plays in protecting abusers? Or is this a revolutionary program that is truly empowering students to "struggle for gender justice"? I can only guess that it is both. I have no doubt that this institute has had a positive impact on its female student musicians. The mission statement of the institute says, "The mission of the Berklee Institute of Jazz and Gender Justice is to recruit, teach, mentor, and advocate for musicians seeking to study jazz with gender equity as a guiding principle."<sup>52</sup> Is all this teaching and mentoring targeted at the professors of Berklee? Because those were the people who assaulted the students. The students were not the problem at Berklee. The professors who were sexually assaulting them were the problem. Is this institute a place for students to find advocates when there are assaults in the future? It is unclear if these changes actually remedy the original

---

<sup>52</sup> "Mission, Values, and Vision: Mission", (Berklee Institute of Jazz and Gender Studies, December 9, 2019) <https://www.berklee.edu/jazz-gender-justice/mission-vision-values>

problems of sexual assault based on what they report on their website and further research on the impact of the institute would be necessary in order to draw any conclusions.

The summer between my junior and senior year of college, I was one of more than a dozen vocalists chosen to sing in the chorus for an opera company, the Eutiner Festspiele, in Lawrence's sister city, Eutin, Germany. We were promised free airfare, lodging, and a small stipend. I had never been out of the country before and this was a dream come true. I was going to get paid to fly to Europe and sing opera? It was amazing. However, while I was overseas, I received my first taste of international racism within opera. One of the operas we were to perform was a strange and not widely performed opera called, *Blume von Hawaii*. This opera was about American colonization in Hawaii, performed in German, portrayed the Americans as the protagonists. There were no Hawaiians in the cast and so I and any vaguely brown or plus sized white person were cast to be the Hawaiians while the tall, white, slender chorus members were chosen to be the Americans. My friend and fellow vocalist, who is a mixed-race Bolivian woman, and myself complained to each other as the white chorus members donned beautiful 1900's era costumes, and we had been draped in floral printed tablecloths. I was, of course, wigged before every performance and participated in stereotypical "hula" dancing throughout the performance. It was honestly nightmarish, but my friends and I had to laugh at the ridiculous cacophony of politically incorrect language, offensive stereotyping we had to participate in, and gross misunderstandings of the history of American imperialism and colonization. What else could we do but laugh? This is what we had been hired to do. We did not receive the music before we arrived and even if we had, how were we going to turn down the opportunity to put real work on our resumes before we applied for graduate schools?

That summer in 2012, Trayvon Martin was murdered. It was the summer that changed the national conversation on race in America. Although I knew *Blume von Hawaii* was pretty bad, I lacked the understanding to truly unpack the inappropriate subject of this opera and our willingness to participate. I knew I was frustrated at how the Hawaiian chorus had been chosen but I did not have the range to understand that the white, male director had simply looked at our bodies and racialized us without a second thought and how no matter where I traveled, or how I grew as a singer, I would never fully be judged first on the merit of my character and work within the classical music system. And participation in operas where other ethnicities are required but are not performed by people of that population is commonplace in opera tradition. Opera houses all over the world are criticized for continuing to produce beloved operas in a world that is becoming increasingly aware of how hurtful these performances are. Operas like Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, and Bernstein's *West Side Story* have required yellow, black, and brown face performances from white singers for decades, if not over hundreds of years. These operas are some of the most commonly produced operas in the world. These are the money makers when it comes to an opera's season. Without a major overhaul of the American music education system, opera could potentially struggle to cast these operas in a way that will be appropriate to modern audiences. (Whether these problematic storylines of these operas should continue to be produced due to content is debatable in the first place). If these operas wish to continue to be produced and not receive negative critique of cultural insensitivity, then the American Opera System simply HAS to start producing more singers of color, but this cannot happen without a complete restructuring of how opera is taught. I was made aware from the early age of eleven that as a black singer I would always be less valuable within opera and

productions that perpetuate racial stereotypes and remain staples within classical music repertoire, only prove that further.

I offer up my personal experiences to explain how the young career of a musician can disappear after over a decade of racial and sexual discrimination. It did not matter which state, school, or continent I was located, the burden of genre and the reality that I would never be what opera wanted me to be, followed me until my senior year of college when I finally decided I was done.

I was on the bus after audition results had gone up for the Fall Semester of my senior year and I had again, received nothing but chorus work. It suddenly occurred to me that I did not have to be a singer. It was almost a radical thought for me. After so much time, work, and training the majority of my identity was rolled into being a singer. I had had the same dream of singing professionally for over ten years. I knew I was good, but it suddenly occurred to me that it simply was not good enough. This is obviously a privileged notion. At the age of twenty-two I realized that my race may be a factor in my success. So many others learn this a lot faster than I did, but I had not been taught to think like that. I had bought the dream that I had to work hard, and it would come. But as I reflect, I now know that if I had continued in opera it would have taken more from me than I, or any person, should hopefully be willing to give.

I offer up this testimony due to the fact that so many people still hoping to build careers in opera feel as though they cannot tell their story without repercussion. Because although four cases of sexual misconduct connected to the University of Kansas School of Music may seem like a lot, it is nothing compared to the number of stories that we singers whisper about and discuss behind closed doors. I hope through this autoethnography it is clear that despite the socio-economic reasoning as to why there are so few African American opera singers, that this



reality is coupled with the emotional abuse of constant “othering”. That despite the few recent and successful black operas, the opera community as a whole continues to devalue the participation of African American singers and students. In chapter three I continue this examination of the music education system by questioning the theories and ideologies behind these methods of teaching. Additionally, I hope to present alternative methods and ideas on how teaching could both be a more equitable and empowering space for young artists, and also be one that fosters subversive art and reformative instructors.

## Chapter 3

### Young, Gifted, and Black: Deconstructing Methods of Teaching in the American Music Education System and Reconstructing New Ones

In this chapter I aim to question the theories and ideologies behind how music is taught at the collegiate level. I examine the ways in which music school has traditionally used “weeding-out teaching”. Within this chapter I explain my experience with teaching and attempting to utilize traditional African educational teaching strategies with black middle school singers in order to provide more reparative and transformative approaches. I do not present this experience as empirical evidence that these methods would alone correct the institutional problems of the current American music education system. However, I do believe that by approaching music education through this lens it would be possible to provide a safer, healthier, and more comprehensive education to not only African American music students but to all students. I can only explain my experience with teaching and how I tried to implement my previous research in a practical way. Further study on a more widespread and long-term period would be needed to conclude how this approach could affect African American music students. I am again, attempting to take an autoethnographical approach to my experience teaching through the lens of traditional African educational practices.

Working with the girls at the Melting Pot Theater was a serious exercise in battling my own training and balancing it with the intentions and purpose of the class. So often I criticized myself because something was not sounding exactly the way I had envisioned, or because I had provided music that was going to be too difficult. However, on the last rehearsal I was reminded of why we were there in the first place. The standards that my music education had instilled in me still lingered and on a practical level it proved difficult to remove myself from ideas of

“mastery” and to focus on teaching not only the songs but to utilize the skills these girls already had in order to create something completely of their own making.

Traditional American music education has such an incredible focus on competition that often we lose the very thing we are trying to create. The incessant need to achieve what is defined as “perfection” is both silencing and crippling. One of the reasons it took many months to begin this program was my doubt in my own abilities. I felt I needed more time practicing how to conduct and more piano rehearsal, and more and more until I realized that at this pace, I would never have thought I was ready. Although this was something I have been encouraged to do and was told I could do throughout my entire Masters, I had to come to this realization on my own while actually doing the work. How completely satisfying it felt to sing and know that I was providing something concrete to students who could truly use this. I found myself naturally professing my beliefs about music and the arts while teaching and it informed what we were doing and what we were trying to accomplish. I found myself falling in love with these girls and so desperately wanting to protect them within this musical bubble of black girl safety and friendship. I wanted to give them tools that they could later use to protect themselves from the inevitable onslaught of self-doubt and pain that would befall them, as it does all black girls. As I saw their immense confidence and eagerness to play and create, unaware of any reason why they should not feel free to exist, I wanted them to hold onto that forever and to use music to protect them from anything that would make them feel otherwise. It was a lot to feel for four girls in a mere four rehearsals.

The first class was dedicated to *Lift Every Voice*. We went over basic procedures such as how to number measures and make markings in your music during rehearsal. The girls, from the very first rehearsal, were constantly teaching me. When I brought out the song (I had chosen it as

an important black historical piece that I had only learned a year earlier and felt should have been introduced to me previously), I hoped to remedy this lack of musical history in these girls' timeline. However, when I had the girls open their binders all of them exclaimed that they had sung this song in church. And the day after our first rehearsal Beyoncé's *Homecoming* performance debuted on Netflix in which she sings *Lift Every Voice*. At our next rehearsal the girls came in very excited that Beyoncé had sung "our song".

When I showed them the second song, Nina Simone's *Young, Gifted, and Black*, the girls decided it was boring, "sounded like Christmas", and would put the audience to sleep. "We should sing this for black history month," said the youngest. I paused at this comment and asked her why. She shrugged, not really sure why she thought that. I assured the girls that we can sing songs about being proud and black during any time of year, however, they still decided it was too boring. I had introduced the class as being completely their own. I said it was up to them what they wanted to present at the end of the fourth rehearsal and I offered up options such as writing a play, dancing, or just straight singing. No matter how much I loved *Young, Gifted, and Black* I wanted the girls' opinions to directly affect the end result so, to my disappointment, we said goodbye to Miss Simone this time. The girls decided unanimously that they wanted to dance during the final performance. Everyone seemed happy with singing *Lift Every Voice* and I assured them for the second rehearsal I would bring them options that we could dance to and we could choose together what the second piece would be. By the end of the first class, I felt shockingly confident and surprised at how well it had gone. I am so incredibly grateful that an accompanist was found for rehearsals at the cost of the theater. She was so amazing and teaching the songs would have taken so much longer and been so painstaking without her.

For the second class, I brought in some options for music and had told them to think about what they would want to do. Some of them brought in some amazing black choir pieces. “I want to sing this though,” I half joked as one of the girls pulled the video up on YouTube. However, once I did a quick search, I realized it would be difficult to locate the sheet music and was too difficult to accomplish in the short amount of time we had. It was important to me to involve the girls in the decision making. The kind of teacher I wanted to be and the tactics I wanted to use revolved around traditional African educational practices. I wanted to implement the idea of communal responsibility. My hope was that the girls would be more invested in the class if it did not depend solely on me, but rather on us as a team, to produce a quality performance at the end of the four weeks. I wanted them to have ownership over their education.

This contrasts dramatically with the reality of music education at the collegiate level where the overarching idea is that you are an empty vessel for which knowledge is being poured into. When in reality every person on the planet, even those who do not define themselves as a “musician”, has some level of musicality since music is a cultural experience. I wanted to build off the innumerable skills that these girls already possessed. I wanted them to directly apply what they had previously learned to what they were currently creating and feel empowered to do so. I attempted to encourage the use of their previously acquired skills, not erase them so that a more elevated notion of singing could colonize their voices and minds.

As a graduate student I attempted to reach out to professors in the school of music, but my attempts were met with confusion and passive push back. One professor insisted that there were so few African American students in the school of music because there simply were no black students in Kansas. Another argued that there simply was not time to thoroughly examine

African American music because all the other genres had to take priority. I do not accept this. An institution of higher learning is charged with educating the next generation of American musicians. To be an American musician is to be the amalgamation of a multitude of different historical musical influences. The American sound does not exist without African American music makers so how is it possible that there is simply not time to learn about those musicians and genres? With this group of middle school students, I hoped to not only instruct these singers on elementary skills of bel canto singing but to insert the history of our people into the narrative of American music making. I wanted to inform these students that their previously acquired music education was an integral part of the American music tradition; that if they chose to continue to participate in the current American music education system where their contributions are regularly ignored, they would hold onto the truth that their music was in fact of great worth. I wanted them to understand that the music they knew and represented them, mattered.

I attempted to push this lens when even discussing basic vocal technique. For example, when discussing the matter of scooping (a process of sliding up to a note) I explained that this was a completely legitimate way of approaching a note. I asked them however to ask why they were using that at any point. Did it help them more clearly convey what they were trying to say? I asked them to constantly think about why they were singing anything and why they were singing it the way they were. You can decide to sing anything any way you want, but you should think about it and have a reason. If you want to scoop every note, why? This was a huge lack in my musical education. Approaching a note with a scoop was not discussed as a legitimate musical decision but as a sign of unsophisticated technique, poor control, and a “lesser” way of singing. Although I was constantly asked to think about the words of a piece, I was rarely asked why I thought the piece was important or worth singing at all. What did I want

to say? Why was I here? This was something I found myself asking the girls to consider throughout the course. I wanted them to know why *Lift Every Voice* was a part of their musical history and what it meant that nearly all of them had previously sung it. That this song had been and continued to be an anthem for black political movement and understanding that was key to their own musical education.

During the second class I came prepared with a couple more upbeat songs that I believed would be easier to dance to including some songs by Aretha Franklin and *Dreamgirls* from *Dreamgirls*. I, who always wanted to perform *Dreamgirls* in high school, was originally excited when the girls decided upon this piece. It would be an easy enough piece to choreograph. I told them since we were on a time crunch that I would go ahead and map out most of the dance moves and then together we could add or edit during the third class. They all seemed happy with that.

When the third class rolled around, and we started attempting to sing *Dreamgirls* I immediately realized I had been over ambitious. The music was way too advanced, fast, wordy, and high pitched, and there was simply not enough time to rehearse. I went home that day feeling defeated. I felt as though I had made a major mistake. We were now not going to be able to sing “*Dreamgirls*” but were only going to be able to dance to the recording. I felt like I had let them down. However, before our final rehearsal it occurred to me that I was allowing someone else’s imposed standards of success to affect me. How could I be letting them down when the purpose of the class was not to perfectly sing *Dreamgirls* but rather was to allow them to create something using their previous musical skills, expand upon them, and to be invested in that production? Together we were achieving those goals. Even though this situation wasn’t preferable (especially after I realized that *Dreamgirls* was written by white men) the girls were

indeed learning, having fun, and felt invested in presenting something they were proud of. These girls practiced before every rehearsal. I was honestly amazed because I knew that I certainly did not practice before every choir rehearsal when I was their age. From the first rehearsal I attempted to give them as much control over the final performance as possible. If talking ensued a little too much, I simply paused and said, “This is your performance. You have complete ownership. You determine if this is the quality that you want to present to your family and friends.” Those girls took that to heart. Despite only having an hour to give them the choreography during the third rehearsal, every girl came in obviously having practiced it and ready to perform that day. They came in excited (many wearing their Sunday dresses); no one forgot their music at home, and it was so clear they had individually rehearsed because everyone came in better than they had when they left the previous rehearsal. Why was I tearing myself apart because we wouldn’t sing *Dreamgirls*? That wasn’t the point. The point was that these girls had been able to expand on the skills they already had, learned some history about *Lift Every Voice* and where it came from, had fun, and created something they were proud of, and I had been able to impart some of my thoughts and ideologies subtly along the way.

The final performance came all too soon. The girls jumped around anxiously and excitedly told me how nervous they were. “I’m kind of nervous too,” I admitted, and they laughed. But I really was nervous. There were so many more people at the performance than I thought there would be. It was honestly amazing to see how many family members, cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and friends came to support this very humble group. It was stunning the little community that had appeared and was so excited to see what the girls and I had come up with. Despite our collective nerves and excitement, I raised my hand, cued the accompanist and the performance began. It both seemed to last forever and yet was over in an instant. One



minute I was conducting and desperately trying to remind the girls when to breathe during *Lift Every Voice* and the next, I was bouncing my hip with the girls so they would not forget the Diana Ross inspired choreography. And then it was over. In a blur of pride and relief, it was over. The two weeks I had worried about for nearly two years was over.

After the performance, the girls surrounded me and told me the points where they forgot to do this or that and I honestly don't know what they were talking about. It was just so good. I felt so good. It felt productive and real and the parents were so happy. The girls all gave me hugs and said they were excited to see me again and I never wanted to leave them. This felt important, like we were really accomplishing something. These girls wanted to learn more about music, they wanted to gain skills and their families valued this education. They valued taking off the afternoon to come see a fifteen-minute performance. They valued making sure the girls were on time, had their binders, and rehearsed. It was suddenly clear to me that it had not just been me and the girls working together, it had been this entire audience as well. Having parents on board that truly valued the work we were doing and understood this vision was vital to the success of these students.

In a TED Talk with Rita Pierson, she emphasizes the importance of the teacher-student relationship. “Kids don’t learn from people they don’t like,”<sup>53</sup> she claimed, which is solid advice. I think back to the stress I put myself through and the tears I cried after class because I was so worried that I was not giving these students what they needed. However, when I think of the all the laughing, dancing, and singing we did in two weeks and how excited they were to participate

---

<sup>53</sup> Rita Pierson, “Every kid needs a champion | Rita Pierson”, (TED, May 3, 2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFnMTHhKdkw&t=300s>

and the work they had put into the performance we had put on, I knew we had built real relationships.

Last year when I went to the Kauffman Center of Performing Arts to see *West Side Story* I ran into my accompanist of four years. When she asked me to give an overview of what I was studying currently she interrupted me and said, “But you’re so light.” I paused a little surprised, but she went on to clarify. “I mean, you have beautiful skin and your eyes are so pretty but you’re so light.” What she really meant was, “Why do you care about black music? You’re light skinned and why would you care about working with African American students?” Apart from only complimenting my most European features, this felt like more proof that every time I tried to enter an operatic space and assert my blackness that it would only ever be met with confusion and polite racism. I had not sung opera in five years and still the same sinking feeling of not belonging suddenly built in my stomach. When I was thirteen and that girl at the Texas All-State auditions assumed how I would sound due to my blackness, the assumption of my participation in black musicality had been used to make me feel different within a predominantly white musical space. Fifteen years later as I stood in the oversized white marble foyer, a black dot among white faces and white stone, I was now assumed to be light and too white to even care, let alone participate, in black genre and artistic production. The irony of racism is that it does not make sense, it never will, and it cannot because it is illogical. Racism is simply a construction of excuses and violent rhetoric created to keep black people out. Out of opera. Out of education. Out of their own historically produced genres. Out of housing. Out of citizenship. Out of democracy. Out of well-paying jobs. Out of everything. Only to be put into submissive positions. Into ghettos. Into jails. Into plantations. Into graves, only to be pulled out when it is at the

convenience of whiteness. Our music, genres, styles, and aesthetics are only valuable when whiteness wants to use it.

When I worked with the girls at The Melting Pot Theater and I entered an artistic space that not only valued my blackness, but it was a primary lens through which all creative output was seen, the experience was like coming up for air. To make art for a decade in a space in which no one cared or wanted your black opinion; a space in which I was only allowed to be black when it would be nice to close the program with a “fun” spiritual, had me believe that there was no place for me artistically. Being in The Melting Pot Theater was the only time I have felt that I could use my whole self to be part of the creative process and to do so with these four amazing, brilliant, and beautiful young girls was one of the most impactful musical moments of my life.

Music school has a reputation for being an intense and painful experience. Just watch the movie *Whiplash*<sup>54</sup> and you will know what I am talking about. In this film a jazz percussion student who attends a fictitious music conservatory is physically and emotionally abused by his professor. This situation is presented as a necessary part of the artistic experience. This movie won three academy awards. The artist’s “pain” is constantly romanticized. This idea is seen in movies like *Fame* and *Center Stage* as well. Music school is supposed to be traumatic and, in the end, it probably makes you a better artist is the argument that many of these movies make. It is true that often artists do use their previous pain and trauma in their work. I have essentially used mine to write this entire thesis. However, the traumatic part should not be learning. Learning how to translate your experiences into art should not be the traumatic part. Assault and trauma

---

<sup>54</sup> “*Whiplash*”, Directed by Damian Chazelle, (A Sony Pictures Classics, October 15, 2014).

should not be seen as a necessary part of the artistic process because it merely justifies abuse within this system.

Within music education it is seen as a requirement to “weed out the weak”. Every music student receives the “If-You-Can-Do-Something-Else-Then-Do-It” speech at some point early on in their education. Professors explain that it is a long and difficult journey to become a professional musician. It will be a lot of work, low bank accounts, and tears. However, there is no discussion about how the system is biased towards the wealthy. There is no discussion regarding how difficult it will be to avoid sexual harassment and assault. There is no discussion of the emotional abuse that you may have to endure, and because it is not discussed it just keeps happening. I argue that it does not have to. There are more productive, healthy, and safe ways that music can be taught. It does not have to be this way and music students should not be expected to endure trauma in order to become artists. This requires completely altering the definition of success. If success is only determined as being achieved once a singer has made their Metropolitan Opera debut, then there truly is not room for many at the top and this method of “weeding out” will have to continue. However, if music students are taught to determine their own measures of success and find the spaces and fellow creators where they can best do their work then that is a different way of perceiving “success”. If a student is actually taught to think of music as having a truly tangible purpose and that they themselves have to determine what their purposes are, then the goals change. The purpose of the education changes. Instead of frantically attempting to shove in as many white European composers into the heads of students, perhaps it would be more productive to teach musicians how to think. What if instead of “weeding out” students we took Pierson’s advice and we focused on the relationships built between a student and professor? What if we instead of blaming a student for falling behind, we

as educators, took the time to understand and help, to be a “champion” for our students? I constantly think about all the black artists we will never know because no one would help them get through Theory I. How many black musicians will we never hear because they could not take the racist rhetoric continuously floating around classical music? How many black singers will never be on stage because casting directors have determined that their skin is too dark to play Cinderella?

In W.E.B. Du Bois’ *Criteria of Negro Art* he describes a black woman in Chicago who is a “great musician.”<sup>55</sup> However, when she applies for a school of music the application states that only white musicians are welcomed. “We can go on the stage; we can be just as funny as white American wish us to be; we can play all the sordid parts that America likes to assign to Negroes; but for anything else, there is still small place for us”<sup>56</sup>. Who was this great musician? Did she ever play again? How many voices have we lost because they were excluded from the conversation, were “weeded out”, or simply never received the proper encouragement from a teacher who could understand their history, background, and trials?

By utilizing traditional African educational practices such as communal responsibility, applying previously learned musical skills to lessons, and understanding why music can be a practical tool for political movement, it is my belief that this could be a useful step in the process of dismantling the currently oppressive American music education system. If music education moved away from the current “weeding out” type of education and instead implemented more Afrocentric educational theories, then perhaps the system itself could transform into a space where all people felt free to safely participate.

---

<sup>55</sup> William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, “*Criteria of Negro Art*”, (Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), 998.

<sup>56</sup> William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, “*Criteria of Negro Art*”, 999.

## Conclusion: Singing My Way Back

This first opera I ever attended was a production of *Macbeth* at The Dallas Opera. My choir director (not the one who had put on a white production of *The Wiz*) had encouraged me to apply for a program called the Dallas Opera Scholars Program. Essentially, those chosen, not only got to attend the entire opera season for free but also had opportunities to speak to the opera's art director, go backstage, check out costumes, and at one point we were able to even perform for the director of the opera at his home during a cocktail party. I am not exactly sure who we performed for but I remember singing to a CD of the fastest *Non So Piu* from *Le Nozze di Figaro* probably ever performed. However, the most memorable moment from the experience was seeing George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. The only part I remember was the very opening scene when soprano, Clara, sings *Summertime*. It was as though the first note had always been in there, just too quiet for anyone to hear, and then the singer had simply turned up the volume and suddenly we could hear her. Her voice slid seamlessly out of the air as though air should never exist without it. It was the moment I knew I wanted to be an opera singer. I was sold. I had always wanted to sing professionally but I had thought that I was more inclined towards musical theater, but after seeing *Porgy and Bess* (and the fact that I had always been pretty miserable at belting), I knew this was the direction I wanted to go. However, when I told my father about this desire, he was less than enthusiastic. My grandmother (his mother) had not had an easy life as an opera singer, plagued with chorus work that never lead to real roles (or at least that is how it's been explained to me). But I was committed. I loved this music. I loved singing it. Despite my father's reluctance, he found me a voice teacher at the University of North Texas (one of the best music schools in the country) where he was a professor of history. I was merely a sophomore in

high school and the repertoire I was singing, in hindsight, was too advanced, but we were off to the races.

I truly love opera. I love the work of singing. I love that it's probably the most collaborative art form in existence. I just want to be able to be a part of it without all the pain. I want this collaborative art form to evolve, to get better. I think it can do amazing, new, and revolutionary work if it has the desire to. South African opera tradition has already cemented its legacy as being an art form *for* its people. In Naomi Andre's *Black Opera*, she discusses *Winne: The Opera*, composed and orchestrated by Xhosa composer Bongani Ndongana Breen. This post-apartheid opera that follows the story of Nelson Mandela's wife, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, is a part of the country's tradition of creating and using operatic works to represent the mixed population of South Africa. "The question of opera as a chosen genre might seem jarring to some, since it could represent the height of white western European elitism. However... No longer a borrowed replication of a foreign tradition, South Africa-specifically black, mixed race, and white South Africans-is creating a new vision and function for opera. South African opera brings together a new interracial collaboration between white, mixed race, and black South Africans that present Western and traditional South African inspired narratives performed by the bodies and voices of its citizens".<sup>57</sup> Post-apartheid South Africa decided to apply what it had learned directly to the artistic production it was going to perform. They demanded more from their opera than just a repetition of the classics, but instead commissioned new works that used the art form to do the work that the country needed it to. They blended genres together, including South African jazz (Marabi and Jaiva) and hip-hop (Kwaito), to attempt to eliminate the hierarchy of genre and center traditional South African music, and thusly its people, within the

---

<sup>57</sup> Andre, "Black Opera", 171.

narrative. The American music tradition can only be defined as “mixed”. It is the amalgamation of history and race. It is my view that this vision of opera is needed on this side of the Atlantic. To not demand that opera, do this kind of political and representative work is to belittle the potential of opera as an art form. It can do more than play the same classics over and over again for a dying breed of predominantly white opera enthusiasts.

In Fall 2018 a YouTube video went viral of Babatunde Akinboboye, a Nigerian baritone based in California. Akinboboye records himself in the car singing the title aria of Figaro but there is something different about this rendition. The video starts, and we first hear the opening bars to Kendrick Lamar’s *Be Humble*. Genre and its associations lead the viewer to believe we are about to watch this man simply sing-along or do the familiar voice over, however in a twist, instead of the expected voice of Lamar, the beat continues and the baritone proceeds to sing Figaro. I have seen opera singers (primarily white) post videos where they sang hip-hop lyrics in an operatic style, but this always became a parody, juxtaposing how drastically different these two genres are and how they do not go together. However, in this video this artist showed the complete opposite. Instead, he asserts his understanding of black musicality and feels free to assert his own existence in opera.<sup>58</sup> An existence that acknowledges that without African Americans, there is no American opera tradition. I want more of this. I want blackness centered in opera, or any space. It is more than checking the obligatory “diversity box” and it is more than the stale and stagnant push for “representation”. I want more than just black faces on the opera stage; I want our intellect, our unique musicality, our educational practices, our ideologies, and our theories acknowledged and valued. What if we fostered this kind of art and creativity in our education?

---

<sup>58</sup> Babatunde Akinboboye, “*What opera sounds like in my head...Hip Hopera*” (Babatunde Akinboboye, December 8, 2018). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F07VAXKXGWE&t=10s>



In November 2019, Kanye West premiered his opera *Nebuchadnezzar*-a reworking of some of his previous music, familiar Christmas songs, and new repertoire. Beyond starring West, the other singers are undeniably opera singers. Clocking in with a run time of 50 minutes, fully staged, full orchestra, ambitious setting, and performed by opera singers, it took critics no time at all to start proclaiming that this was no opera. It was called anything but an opera. It must be a passion play, it's an oratorio, it's a staged song cycle. The New York Times article was literally titled, *Kanye West Is Operatic. His Opera Is Not*.<sup>59</sup> As if there is a run time requirement for a production to be determined as an opera. There absolutely is not. The author goes even further to say that the vocalists come across as "Andrea Bocelli"-like, which may not seem like an insult but in 'opera talk', absolutely is, and an unnecessary one at that. This work blends genres together to create something new on this side of the Atlantic, at the very least. But instead of recognizing the attempt to center black musicality in opera, critics asked boring questions like, "Is this an opera?". I feel as though there are far more interesting questions to be asked surrounding this opera. Has a black man (despite his controversial standing within the black community) centered not only his musicality but his own compositions in an opera and was it successful? Did it do subversive work? Is there a message beyond the religious story? I wonder why critics focused on the *validity* of this work instead of its merit within the historical context of opera's relationship to black America.

A bootleg video of West's newest opera, *Mary*, which follows the nativity story, was uploaded following its premiere on November 9, 2019, to YouTube<sup>60</sup> and although blurry and the poorest of video quality one can tell that the opera is, without a doubt, an opera. The chorus

---

<sup>59</sup> Zachary Woolfe, "*Kanye West Is Operatic. His Opera Is Not*," (The New York Times, November 25, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/25/arts/music/kanye-west-nebuchadnezzar-opera.html>

<sup>60</sup> Vanessa Beecroft, "*A Kanye West Opera -MARY- Directed by Vanessa Beecroft*", (Living Witness TV, December 9, 2019), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0\\_pmnlaUpw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0_pmnlaUpw)

at points seems hesitant, maybe a little unsure. Personally, I would like to have seen some more singing. I wonder what an opera like this would look like if it had not been created by a man who centered himself so much but rather the voices of the amazing black artists he had hired. What would this look like if it had the experience and resources of an established opera company behind it? However, one thing that does strike me is the audience. The bootleg YouTube video, taped by a man who states halfway through that, “I know a little bible,” after he begins to quote bible verses with West. The audience, familiar with the religious text, and the Christmas music, feels free not only to speak the words but to sing along at certain points. The audience responds to West as though he is a black preacher in church, responding to his calls. It is unclear how much of the audience is black but there is a sense that the audience feels free to engage, quite unlike your typical opera audience. After a singer has completed a song, the audience claps and hollers support, while the opera continues, a virtual sin in opera houses. West has produced something that was able to break the mold and encourage black audience members to feel as though they were being taken to church and could feel free to participate with the performers. According to Akinboboye, who attended *Nebuchadnezzar* and released a Facebook video<sup>61</sup> reviewing the opera, claimed that the audience was also participating. West is creating operas that include audiences beyond the same, predominately white audiences. West engaged people who are rarely seen or included in an art form that, in America, has built a tradition that has stolen from their musicality and aesthetics. What could opera look like if opera houses, with their experience and resources, truly embraced ambitious projects that may not be this, but something along this line.

---

<sup>61</sup> Babatunde Akinboboye, “Thoughts on Kanye West’s opera: Nebuchadnezzar”, (Facebook, December 2, 2019), [https://www.facebook.com/watchparty/501664983756083/?entry\\_source=USER\\_TIMELINE](https://www.facebook.com/watchparty/501664983756083/?entry_source=USER_TIMELINE).

*Black Sound, White Noise* is an attempt to explain the hierarchy of genre and how it actively hurts black Americans, the systemic ways in which oppression is perpetrated by genre and music education and examine what these effects are on the individual. My hope is to continue in this work as I feel as though I have merely scratched the surface of what is to be said. I would like to continue to try connecting my experience to a more historical one. What is the history of oppression and abuse within the opera house for African American patrons and musicians? How many more black operas and scores lay hidden in attics and basements, waiting to be found and finally produced? How many more victims of abuse exist, and would they ever entrust me with the responsibility of telling their stories? I would like to further examine how we can take these concepts of traditional African educational thought and apply them to more than just music education; applying them to how we approach all fields, activist work, and community building. I believe that I have theories that I would like to continue to put into practice such as the use of traditional African educational practices in the American system, whilst also continuing to dismantle “weeding out” education. These Darwinian, archaic, sexist, and racist conceptualizations of education are what continues to guarantee that those who could bring unique and different points of view to a field remain excluded. And those who do succeed only do so by molding themselves into a distorted version of what the system thinks they should be.

After my undergraduate degree, I never wanted to go back to school. I stepped away. I took time to find what I was good at and what I liked. I discovered an entire field that has helped me conceive of why I had hated my time in college previously. Throughout this time, I never stopped singing. It is a part of me. It is no longer my sole identity, but it is a part of me that I can never fully abandon, nor would ever want to. Through this process of pain, understanding,

decolonizing, reading, and learning I have been able to sing my way back to a new place of love, purpose, joy, and music.

## Bibliography

Achebe, Chinua, *Things Fall Apart*, (Penguin Books, 2018), 28.

Akinboboye, Babatunde, “Thoughts on Kanye West’s opera: Nebuchadnezzar”, (Facebook, December 2, 2019),

[https://www.facebook.com/watchparty/501664983756083/?entry\\_source=USER\\_TIMELINE](https://www.facebook.com/watchparty/501664983756083/?entry_source=USER_TIMELINE) .

Akinboboye, Babatunde, “*What opera sounds like in my head...Hip Hopera*” (Babatunde Akinboboye, December 8, 2018).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F07VAXKXGWE&t=10s>

André, Naomi, *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement*, (University of Illinois Press, 2018), 2-4.

Barka, Amiri, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, (Perennial, 2002),viii-ix.

Beecroft, Vanessa, “*A Kanye West Opera -MARY- Directed by Vanessa Beecroft*”, (Living Witness TV, December 9, 2019”, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0\\_pmnlaUpw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0_pmnlaUpw)

“Black Panther”, Directed by Ryan Coogler, (Disney, February 16,2018).

“Artist Applicants: Costs.” Seagle Music Colony. <https://seaglecolony.org/applicants/> (December 10, 2019)”.

Brackett, David, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music*, (University of California Press, 2016).

“*Whiplash*”, Directed by Damian Chazelle, (A Sony Pictures Classics, October 15, 2014).

Cooper, Michael, “*James Levine's Final Act at the Met Ends in Disgrace.*” (The New York Times, March 12, 2018) <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/12/arts/music/james-levine-metropolitan-opera.html>.

- Davis, Angela, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, (Vintage Books, 1998), 27-28.
- Delpit, Lisa, *Multiplication is for White People: Raising Expectations for Other People's Children*, (New Press, 2013), 33.
- Douglass, Frederick, "*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*", (Chelsea House, 1988), 64.
- Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt, "*Criteria of Negro Art*", (Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), 998.
- Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of Race Concept*, (Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), 550-571.
- Floyd, Samuel, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States*, (Oxford University Press, 1997), 46.
- Kids Dance for Joy after Getting 'Black Panther' Tickets" YouTube Video, 0:41, posted by "USA Today", February 6, 2018, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=4xm67vTnFjw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4xm67vTnFjw).
- Garbus, Liz "*What Happened, Miss Simone?*", (Netflix, 2015).
- Gaunt, Kyra, *The Games Black Girls Play: Music, Body and "Soul"* (New York University Press, 1997) 180.
- Griffin, Farah Jasmine, *When Malindy Sings: A Meditation on Black Women's Vocality*, (Columbia University Press, 2004), 104.
- Griffin, Rachel Alicia, *I AM an Angry Black Woman: Black Feminist Autoethnography, Voice, and Resistance*, (Routledge, 2012),
- Hale, Jon, *Freedom Schools: Student Activists in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement*, (Columbia University Press, 2018), 134.

Larimer, Sara, “*Boston’s Berklee College of Music reeling amid sexual misconduct allegations involving professors*” (The Washington Post, November 14, 2017)

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2017/11/14/bostons-berklee-college-of-music-reeling-amid-sexual-misconduct-allegations-involving-professors/>

Harris, Lashawn, *Sex Workers, Psychics, and Numbers Runners: Black Women in New York City’s Underground Economy*, (University of Illinois Press, 2016), 5-6.

Lazar, Kay, “*Berklee let teachers quietly leave after alleged sex abuse, and pushed students for silence*” (Boston Globe, November 8, 2017),

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2017/11/08/berklee-college-lets-teachers-quietly-leave-after-alleged-sexual-abuse-students-least-one-found-another-teaching-job/yfCkCCmdJzxkiEgrQK4cWM/story.html>

Litwack, Leon F., *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*, (Vintage Books, 1998), 7.

Lovett, Samuel “*Serena Williams banned from wearing ‘Black Panther’ catsuit at future French Open, says tournament chief*”, (Independent, August 24, 2018),

<https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/tennis/serena-williams-black-panther-catsuit-bodysuit-french-open-banned-president-a8505911.html> .

“*Mission, Values, and Vision: Mission*”, (Berklee Institute of Jazz and Gender Studies, December 9, 2019) <https://www.berklee.edu/jazz-gender-justice/mission-vision-values>

“*Mission, Values, and Vision: Vision*”, (Berklee Institute of Jazz and Gender Studies, December 9, 2019) <https://www.berklee.edu/jazz-gender-justice/mission-vision-values>

Mortensen, Riley, “*Music School Community Struggles with Questions after Sexual Battery Case.*” (The University Daily Kansan, March 1, 2015),

[http://www.kansan.com/news/music-school-community-struggles-with-questions-after-sexual-battery-case/article\\_100f7a06-c096-11e4-9322-ff8ab8ac4ba9.html](http://www.kansan.com/news/music-school-community-struggles-with-questions-after-sexual-battery-case/article_100f7a06-c096-11e4-9322-ff8ab8ac4ba9.html).

“Nina Simone: Who Am I?”, YouTube video, 4:06, posted by “Nina Simone”, February 2, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RSoxiYPex4E>

Pierson, Rita, “Every kid needs a champion | Rita Person”, (TED, May 3, 2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFnMTHhKdkw&t=300s>

Reagan, Timothy G., *Non-Western Educational Traditions: Local Approaches to Thought and Practice*, (Routledge, 2018), 68.

Redmond, Shana L., *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora*, (New York University Press, 2014), 1.

Rhoden, William C. “*Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete*”, (Three Rivers Press, 2006), 171-196.

Woolfe, Zachary, “*Kanye West Is Operatic. His Opera Is Not,*” (The New York Times, November 25, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/25/arts/music/kanye-west-nebuchadnezzar-opera.html>

Rothstein, Richard, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, (Liveright Publishing Company, 2017), 95-96.

Shange, Ntozake, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, (Scribner, 2010).

Shepherd, Sara, “*Former Lawrence Orchestra Conductor KU Instructor Sentenced to Prison for Sex Acts with Teen.*” (Lawrence Journal-World, July 6, 2018), <https://www2.ljworld.com/news/2018/jul/06/former-lawrence-orchestra-conductor-ku-instructor-sentenced-to-prison-for-sex-acts-with-teen/>.



Shepherd, Sara, “*Student-Led Rock Chalk Invisible Hawk Group Issues Diversity-Related Demands for KU; Here’s Some More Context.*” (Lawrence Journal-World, November 12, 2015), [https://www2.ljworld.com/weblogs/heard\\_hill/2015/nov/12/student-led-rockchalkinvisiblehawk-group/](https://www2.ljworld.com/weblogs/heard_hill/2015/nov/12/student-led-rockchalkinvisiblehawk-group/).

Stoeber, Jennifer Lynn, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York University Press, 2016).

Williams, Mará Rose, “*Former Student Alleges KU Didn’t Investigate Claim a Professor Sexually Assaulted Him.*” (The Kansas City Star, April 5, 2017) <https://www.kansascity.com/news/local/article142823104.html>